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Railroads!

consoles, and more

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[Xantham] yells: chuck norris dont read mags. LOL!11!
[1. General] [Gabbagabba]: It's called MASSIVE Magazine. Check it out.
Headsmasher has defeated Blartfast in a duel
[1. General] [Xantham]: Ignoe gabba, he's a SPAMMER, LOL!!!
[4. LookingForGroup] [Lifeblighter] LFG ZF need healer and tank, have mallet PST
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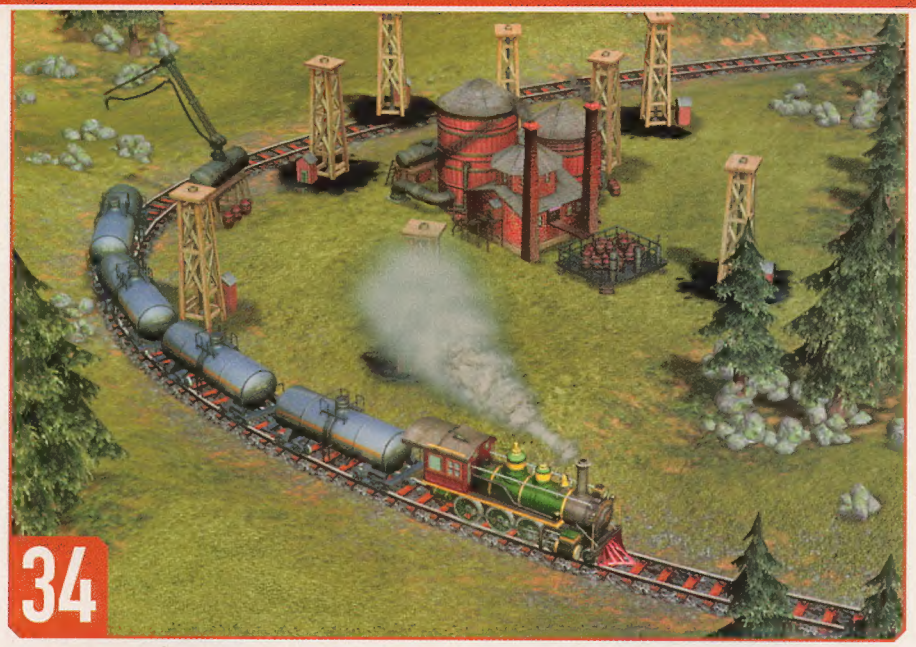

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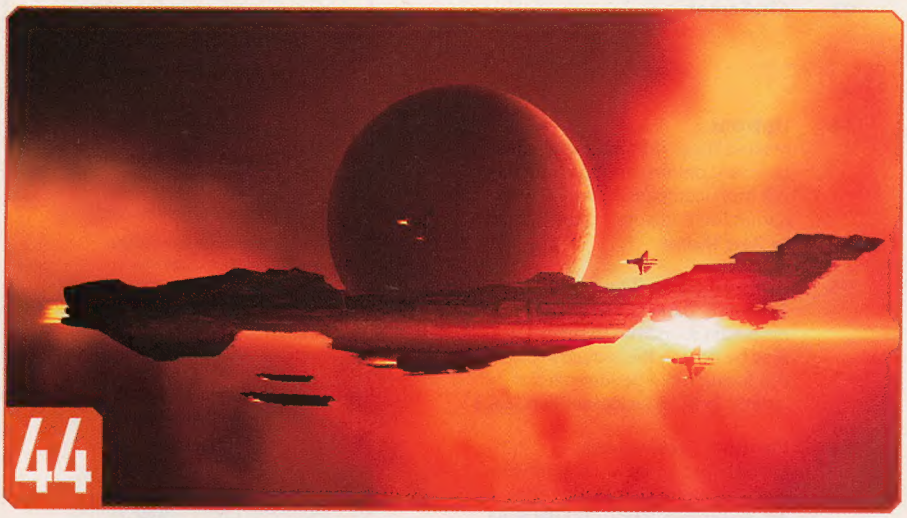

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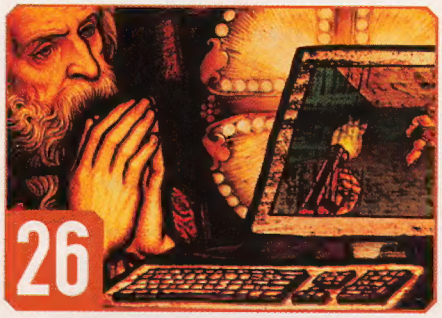

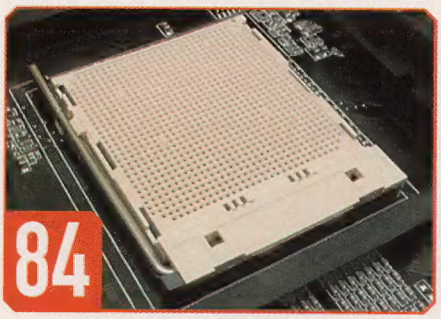

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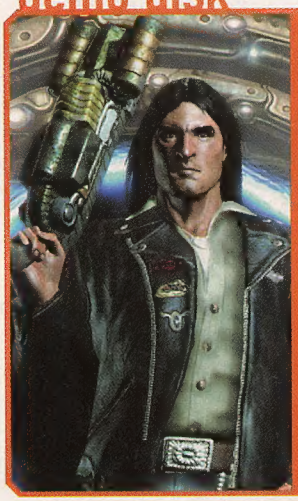

Prey for Demos

Most of this month's demo CD is taken up by the demo of Prey. This Native American-themed shooter will test all of your reflexes, including your gag one; this alien world is gross. This is a long demo, and well worth checking out. Also this month: The superb Out of the Park Baseball 2006, Darwinia, Eets, and Earache Extreme Metal Racing, which lives up to its name on all counts. There's also the usual assortment of quality wallpapers from the nice chaps at gamewallpapers.com.

INSTRUCTIONS The disc should autoplay once placed in your CD-ROM. If it does not, double-click on CGCD.EXE to launch the interface. If you have a defective CD-ROM, a replacement can be obtained by sending the original to: Computer Games, ATTN: CD Replacement, 65 Millet St. Richmond, VT 05477.

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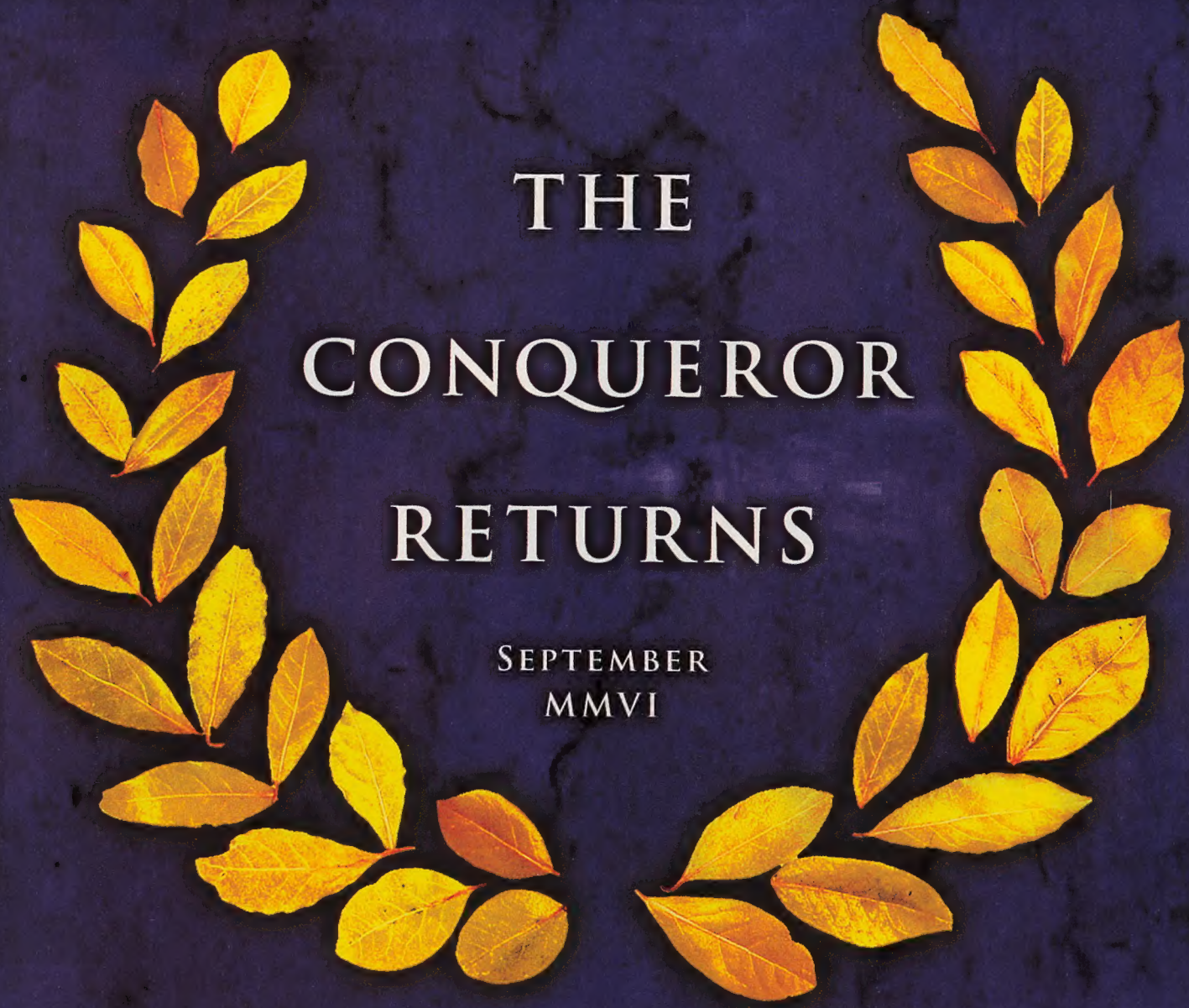

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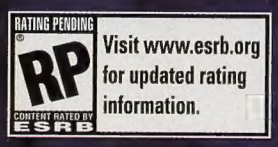

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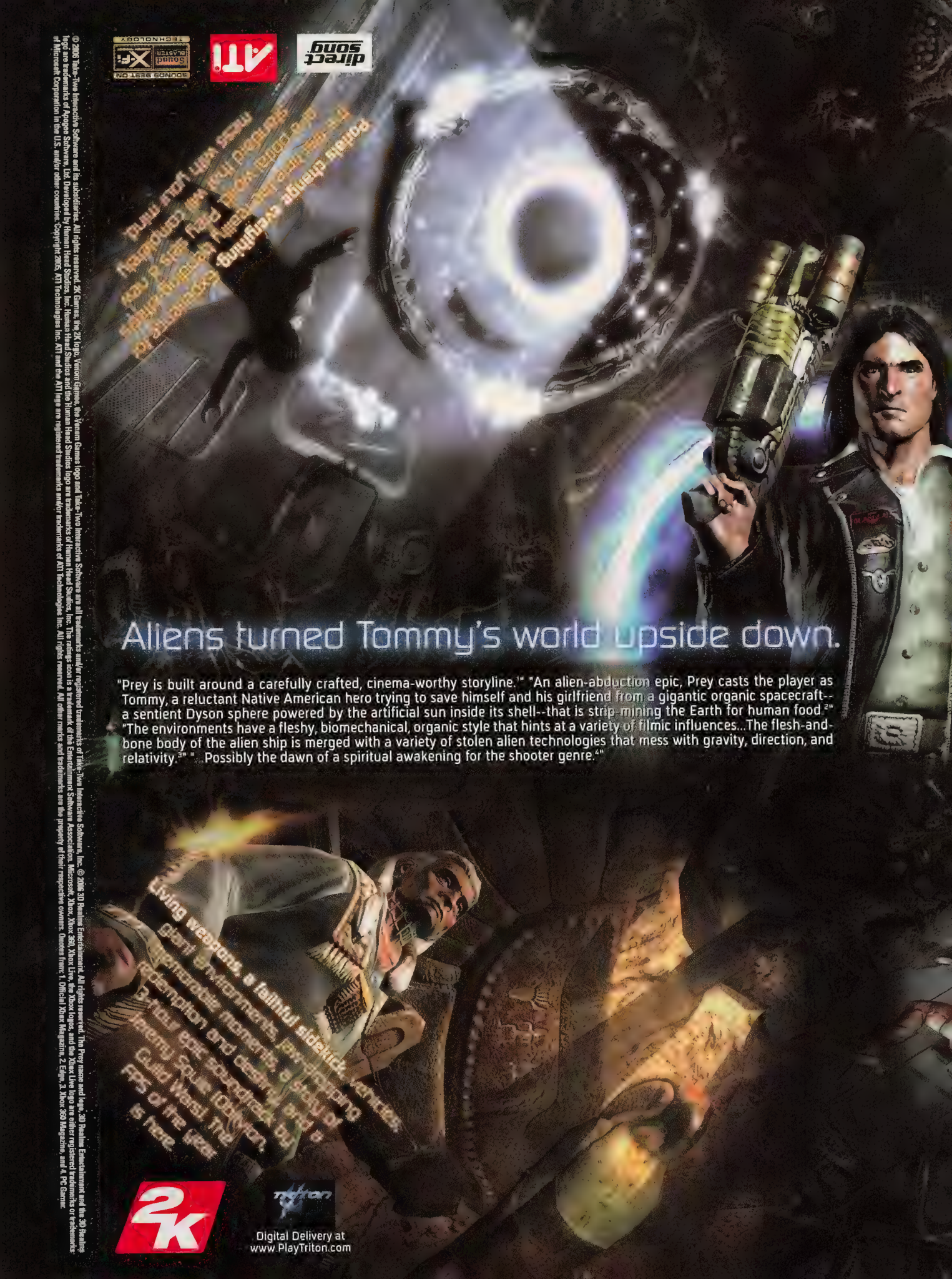
Aliens turned Tommy's world upside down.
"Prey is built around a carefully crafted, cinema-worthy storyline.[1]" "An alien-abduction epic, Prey casts the player as Tommy, a reluctant Native American hero trying to save himself and his girlfriend from a gigantic organic spacecraft--a sentient Dyson sphere powered by the artificial sun inside its shell--that is strip-mining the Earth for human food.[2]" "The environments have a fleshy, biomechanical, organic style that hints at a variety of filmic influences...The flesh-and-bone body of the alien ship is merged with a variety of stolen alien technologies that mess with gravity, direction, and relativity.[3]" "...Possibly the dawn of a spiritual awakening for the shooter genre.[4]"
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by Steve Bauman

"It's not just a matter of having too many games to play; the ones they have are taking too long to play."

Making Time

With too many entertainment options and too little time, will more companies step up with games for "hardcore casual" gamers?

The entertainment world is fragmenting. If you're not watching TV shows and/or movies at a theater or on your TV, you're watching digitized versions of TV shows and/or movies on your computer thanks to the wonder that is YouTube. (Where else can you find horrible music videos by the 1980s band fronted by Ricky Gervais next to ones from instant Internet "star" Emmalina?) If you're not composing another witty blog entry about George W. Bush or getting a word in on your favorite message boards about how awful the next comic book movie will be (*Ghost Rider*, I'm looking at you), you're writing angry e-mails to Anderson Cooper for some inexplicable reason while listening to podcasts, ripping your CD collection, transcoding movies, altering photos, and downloading the latest episode of *Lost*. It's a good thing we all own Macs, since I hear it's the only computer capable of handling these kinds of tasks.

Assuming you're squeezing all of this activity into a predetermined "entertainment" block on any given day, how do you find time to play games, and what types do you play?

This is an interesting problem for both gamers and the industry. The most successful game on the planet remains *World of WarCraft*, and it's designed to monopolize all of your free gaming time—your undead rogue won't level himself, after all. Almost all MMOs penalize you for dabbling. They demand your devotion and attention at all times. If you do not pay your daily leveling dues, you will fall behind. You will not be able to keep up with your friends. You will be mocked by guild mates. You will play the game for eight hours a day, and you will like it.

This is fine for those with a near-infinite amount of game time: kids, college students, the independently wealthy, game magazine editors. But for some people, it's not just a matter of having too many games to play; it's that the ones they have are taking too long.

That sounds like a dumb comment, right? We want all of our games to last forever—how many of us still have *Civilization II* installed? Sometimes the desire for deep, serious, open-ended games is at odds with the need for something a person can do in 15-minute spurts between *Law & Order: SVU* reruns and checking out their friends' and family's Flickr pictures. We're talking about games more complex than *Zuma* but less demanding than *Rise of Legends*. *Civilization*, for example, isn't that game, unless you're disciplined enough to play it one turn per session. (For me, it's "I'll do one turn… crap, it's 4 a.m.")

The people who are most interested in this type of "in-between" games aren't the stereotypical hardcore gamers, the ones who play 24–7 and are permanent travelers on the B&O Railroad. They're former hardcore gamers, ones who got married and had kids or just found themselves with less time on their hands due to an unfortunate intrusion of reality. They aren't quite ready to give up on serious, challenging, and detailed hardcore games, but they're finding it harder to make time for them. They understand and desire depth and complexity but are more concerned with approachability. They want quick tutorials—none of these 1-2 hour marathons—and they want all concepts introduced within the game in a logical fashion as they progress. And they don't need everything explained in excruciating detail.

The games these "hardcore casual" gamers are most interested in are typically more cerebral, though they aren't opposed to pure action. In either case, they want reasonable difficulty levels. They also want games that can be played in short play sessions, with no negative consequences from stopping the game at any moment.

This type of gamer is plentiful, and no one is making a concerted effort to satisfy his or her needs… on the PC, at least. Right now, the Nintendo DS is the *platform du jour*, serving up a variety of turn-based games and others that can be enjoyed in short bursts. These are simple, but still a step up in complexity from typical casual games.

Who will step up to fill this niche? And is it even a niche? Let's hope we find out.

In issue news, we have a few interesting features this month. First up is one on the current state of Christian games; after all, our motto here is "We cover the topics everyone else is smart enough to avoid." We also have a feature on Telltale Games and its attempt to reach the "hardcore casual" gamer through episodic content. Finally, our feature on *Sid Meier's Railroads* is different from our standard cover story. In addition to info about the game itself, it includes a wide-ranging interview with Sid Meier that took place after an epic boardgame battle. We hope you enjoy this approach. ■

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— Brian Tallerico, UGO.COM

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OK, the *Vanguard* beta didn't exactly go as planned. Because of unforeseen technical issues and a switch in publishers, it was delayed for a considerable amount of time. For that we apologize. Such is the nature of beta testing, unfortunately. By the time you're reading this, hopefully you'll be exploring the world of Telon and experiencing the thrill of submitting detailed bug reports. As always, keep sending those letters of love, hate, and devotion to editor@cgonline.com

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I look forward to future issues.

Ris Misner

one second that the majority of your readers are adults, wake up! This type of issue should not even touch the hands of a child, but thanks to your neglect, it has! I will be filing as many complaints against your company as is humanly possible.

Donna Collins

> **"I will be filing as many complaints against your company as is humanly possible."**

Thank You, Come Again

I want you to know that I only purchased your June 2006 magazine for the *Vanguard* beta code. The rest of your "sex" issue was absolute trash. It's sad when a game magazine is so poor it has to rely solely on "sex" to sell magazines. Poor taste.

I have no desire to ever purchase another magazine from you, unless you have some other important exclusive beta code.

Jamie

Revisionist Gold Box History

Brett Todd's article on SSI's "Gold Box" games was terrific. When they first came out, we thought we had died and gone to heaven. We played them over and over again. Though we've played many RPGs since the last Gold Box game was released, we have never come close to duplicating their awesome feel. We still have them all, in their original boxes.

Donald and Linda Bryant

Sex and the Single Gamer

In Kelly Wand's "Sex and the Single Gamer" column, he refers to "a few of the erotic options clearly implied by in-game names like Booty Bay." I'm assuming we're talking about the *World of WarCraft* Booty Bay?

Seeing as how Booty Bay is a neutral settlement, described as a large pirate town, doesn't it make more sense that the "booty" in the town's name refers to a pirate's booty, i.e., treasure? It doesn't seem likely that there was an intention of something "erotic" being implied here.

I guess what's "clear" is that the author seems to have a bit of a one-track mind... and maybe needs to get out a little more. Like Freud said, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

Michael Merrifield

Kelly Wand responds: What's your defense for Double Penetration Valley?

Sex & the PC

I am writing to express my extreme disgust with your publishing of the smut in the June 2006 issue. If any of you are parents, you should be ashamed of yourselves! How dare you display and promote pornography in a magazine geared and targeted at juveniles! If you think for

Random Letter of the Month

Over the weekend, I bought a remote control Cadillac, some pink fur, and fake feathers and pimped out the remote control Cadillac. And it was satisfying. If you look closely at the pictures, you can see that it is not purely pink fur, but rather pink with orange highlights.

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Your friend,
Joseph Zabinski

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SPEAKOUT MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD

The Flawed

By Miles Sharpless

As a hardcore gamer, I get upset over things people say about videogames. It seems like every day I hear the same things repeated over and over: "Gaming turns kids into natural-born killers."

I joined the United States Army three years ago and am currently serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom. I've heard all the hype about games being used to train soldiers. The ones we use for training provide realistic Army tactics and scenarios. Plus, there's no way a regular person can bring a Humvee into his apartment and put a wraparound screen all the way around it.

When playing a videogame, I sometimes try using Army tactics; however, the game can't come close to simulating anything a real soldier does. This is evident when playing a first-person shooter against real people. When I try to use the tactics that I was taught by the military, they don't work. One reason is that the threat of being killed is nonexistent. No matter how realistic you make a game, you can never simulate the fear that a person must overcome in order to be effective in a combat environment.

"When I try to use the tactics that I was taught by the military, they don't work because the threat of being killed is nonexistent."

For example, in a real combat environment, a soldier seeks cover and concealment in order to stay alive. In a game you don't have to seek cover; you can just stay out in the open and shoot. If you die, it's no big deal—you just re-spawn and try again.

Another thing a game can't simulate is real teamwork. Games like *Battlefield 2* try to get players to work together, but my teammates punish me for team killing after they step right in front of my sector of fire. Teamwork is essential to a real soldier's survival; without it, you're dead. In gaming, you don't have to worry about being a part of the team—not when being the lone wolf is so much more fun.

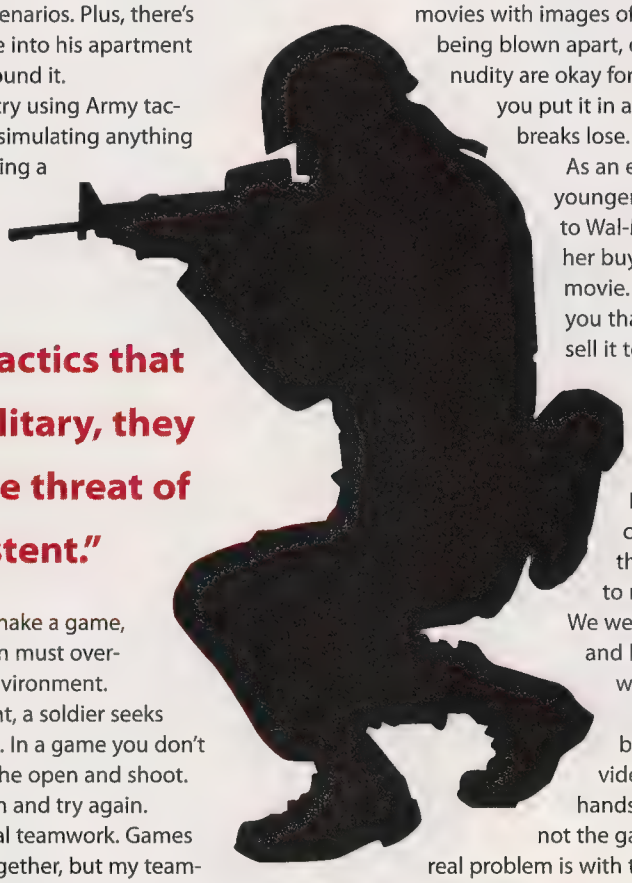
So no matter how hard you try, a videogame will never make you a soldier or a killer. Maybe it improves hand-eye coordination, but a game has never loaded a rifle for me, nor has it pulled the trigger.

But "games are too sexual and violent, and they should not be sold to kids," some would say.

Duh.

That's what ESRB was created for. Don't buy a game for a 10-year-old that is rated for a mature audience. Thanks to the "Hot Coffee" unlockable in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, people no longer trust the ESRB. While it may be fair for people to distrust the ratings after an episode like that, is it fair to attack the whole gaming community for it?

Hillary Clinton and Jack Thompson jumped the whole industry for that one incident, and now games will suffer. The fact is, games are just like any other form of entertainment out there. You don't see Jack Thompson going after Hollywood, but I guess movies with images of girls getting raped, guys being blown apart, or explicit sex with full nudity are okay for people to see. It's when you put it in a videogame that all hell breaks lose.



As an experiment, take a younger brother/sister with you to Wal-Mart and have him or her buy a mature game or movie. I can almost guarantee you that if one cashier doesn't sell it to your sibling, another will. How do I know? Because when I was 20 years old, I couldn't buy an R-rated movie. I had forgotten my ID card. Out of spite, I gave the movie and the money to my 15-year-old brother. We went to another cashier, and he bought the movie with no problem.

So who's really to blame for violent videogames' being in the hands of kids? Not the ESRB, not the gaming industry. No, the real problem is with the flawed people who unjustly attack an industry without addressing any of the true issues. Violent videogames don't mass-produce killers that will bring about the eventual annihilation of our society. The real problem is parents and people in government who don't want to claim responsibility for their own shortcomings and would rather blame the latest thing.

It's too bad the latest thing is videogames.

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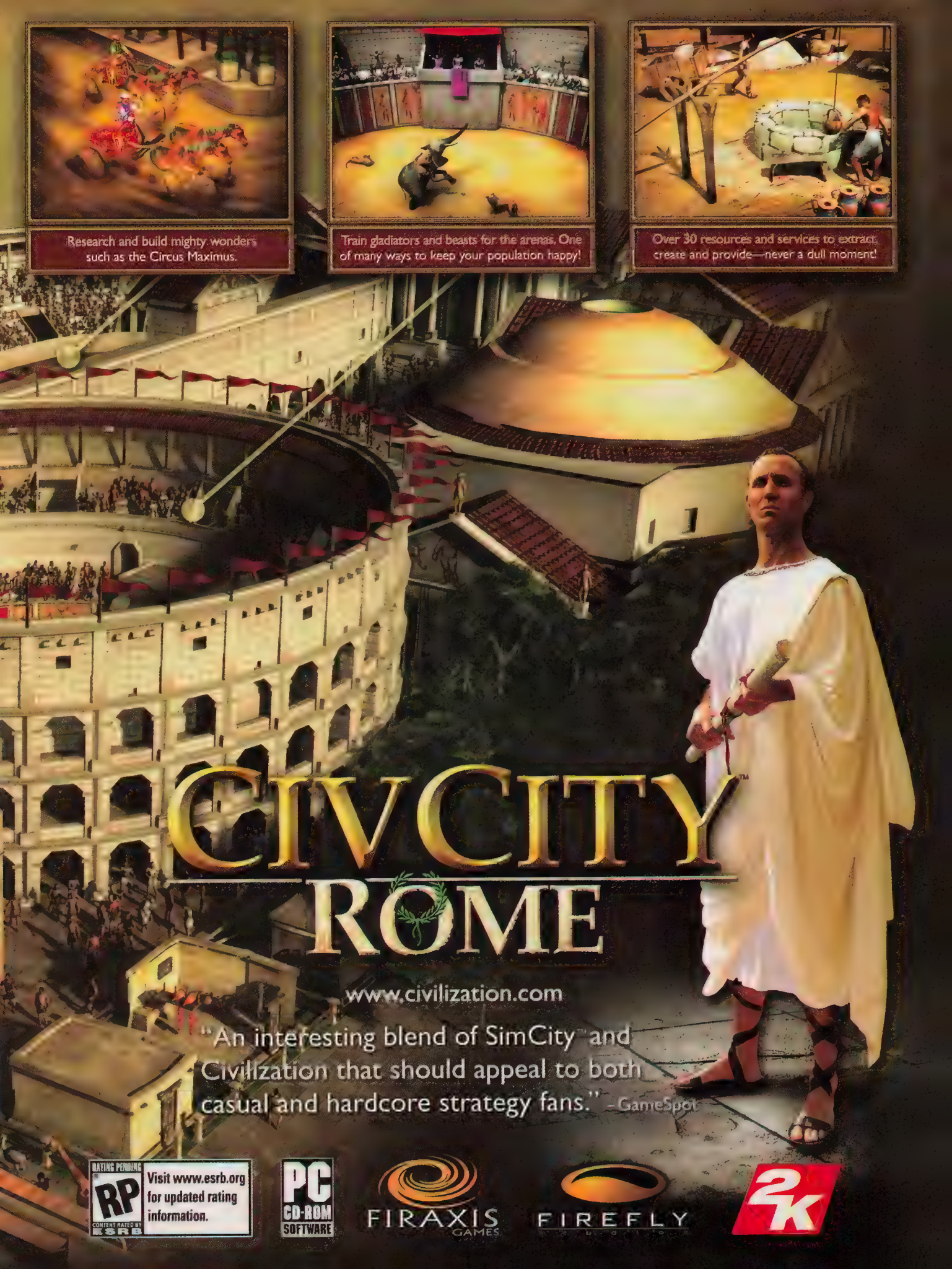
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The grays and slate blues of Dominions II have been replaced by chestnut browns and vibrant greens, but the maps still have a classic look that's driven more by iconography and at-a-glance understanding than by detailed representations of wealth or power.

The Third Crusade

Dominions 3: The Awakening gives a cult hit a makeover BY TROY S. GOODFELLOW

Developer Illwinter Games **Publisher** Shrapnel Games **Release Date** Summer 2006

The *Dominions* series occupies one of the great niches in strategy gaming. Few games require you to make careful observations and take notes, then mix it all up for you when you decide to play a different race. Each game rewards repeated play and deep study. It's not just one of the deepest strategy experiences you'll ever have; it's almost homework. And teacher is working on the next big assignment: *Dominions 3: The Ascension Wars*.

The premise of *Dominions* is some sort of Tolkienesque Ragnarok. God is dead, but instead of plunging into Nietzschean despair, your nation tries to set up its leader—a Pretender—as the new king of kings and lord of lords. The races are a mix of the fantasy familiar, like Elves, Satyrs, and fish people, with pseudohistorical nations based on Roman or feudal armies. As the name suggests, your power grows based on how well you can spread your religious dominion over neighboring lands. You have magic items, magic spells, magic gems… in other words, lots of magic. But this is a religious war, so you need armies of ordinary blokes to help spread the word.

The problem with the *Dominions* games has been twofold. First, they have been some of the homeliest great games on the market, with drab, two-dimensional graphics that are particularly uninspiring for a game about religious inspiration. Second, the archaic interface works against easy understanding of what exactly is happening and why. At times, the games seem not only to reward analysis but to demand it. If you fall behind in your alchemy class, there is no extra credit to help you catch up.

Dominions 3 certainly looks better than past entries. The grays and slate blues of *Dominions II* have been replaced by chestnut browns and vibrant greens. The maps still have a classic look that's driven more by iconography and at-a-glance understanding than by detailed representations of wealth or power. You can see which leader is carrying which gems, which lands are under surveillance, and where the Word of your Pretender is being received as gospel. Some of the vague icons, like those comparing army size, have been replaced by better visual representations of what you will face just over the border.

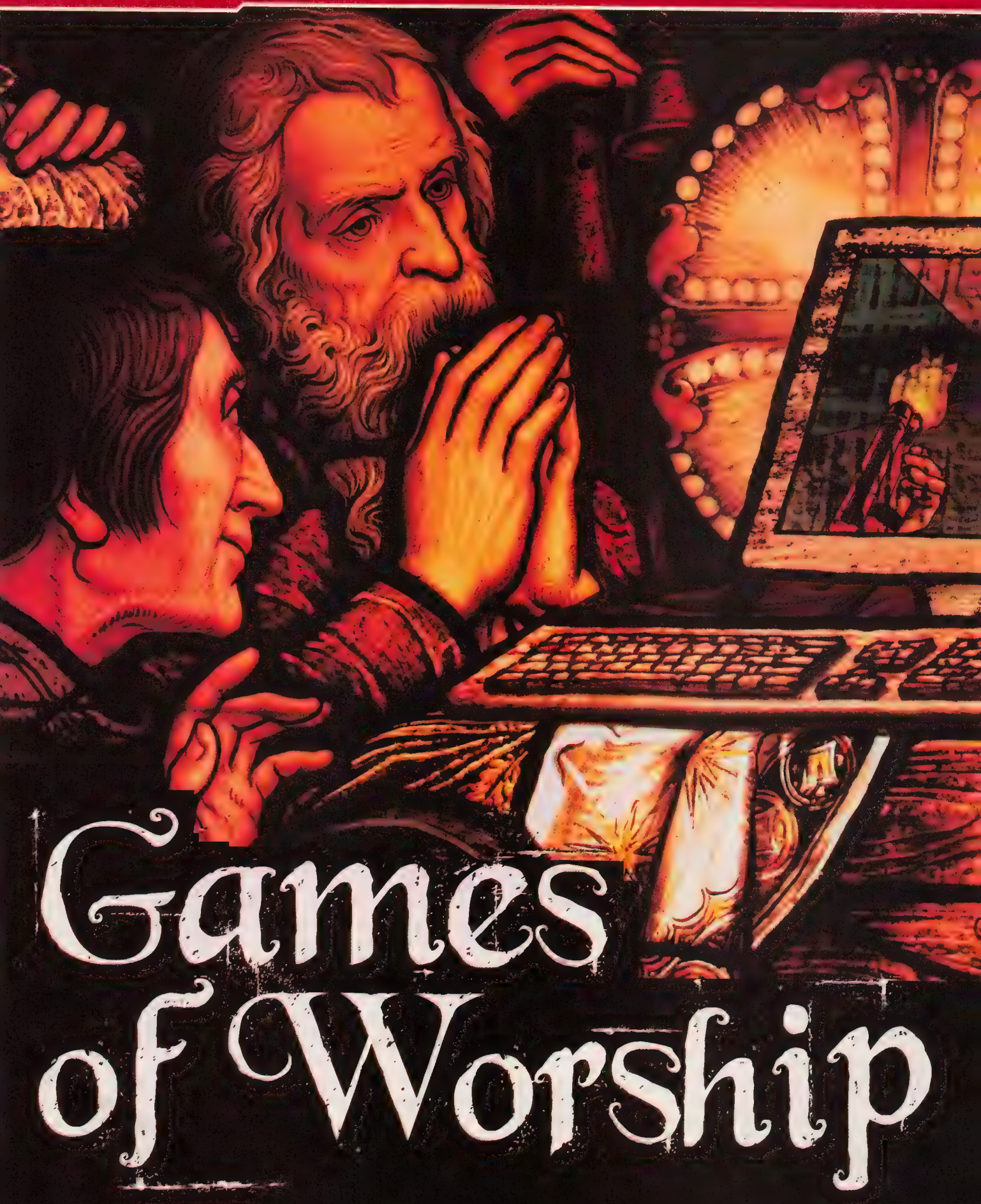
The artistic overhaul continues on the battlefield. New backgrounds bring the world to life, and a battleground editor lets you create new settings for your warfare. The soldiers themselves are still two-dimensional midgets, but they will be easier to distinguish from one another. Even with a tripling of the number of races, some divided into three separate "ages," there is no evidence of a blurring of factions or soldierly roles.

If anything, there will be greater variety with less overlap in the new *Dominions* than in the previous incarnations. You want monkey warriors? They will be here. Fish people and Norsemen? Present. What about a race based on Chinese dynastic warriors? Yes, the Tien Ch'i return, along with water creatures, aerial combatants, and the normal range of undead creatures.

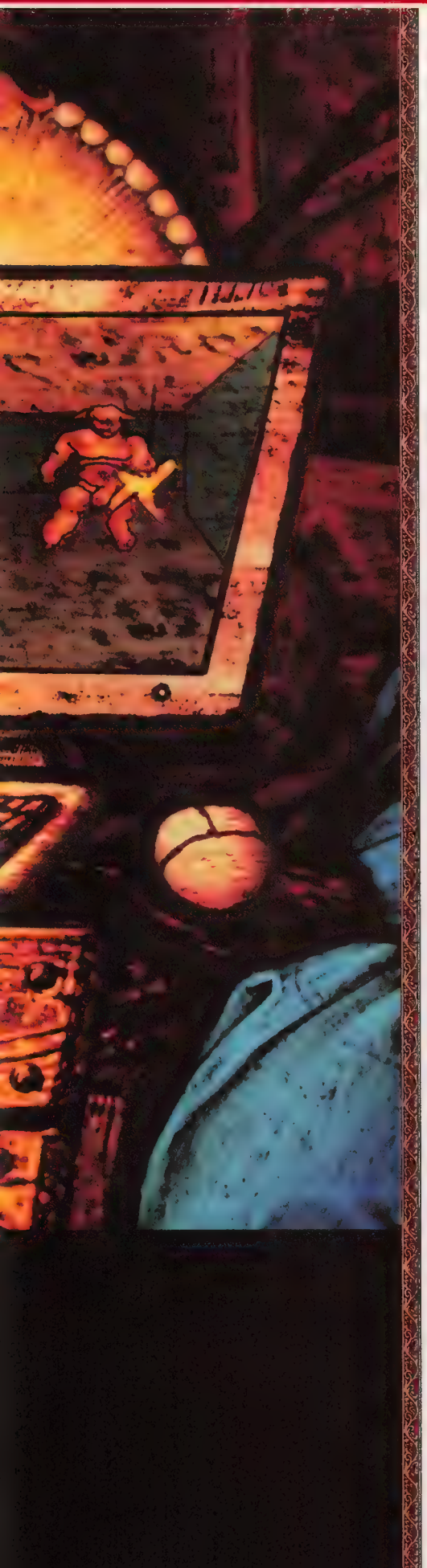
The inclusion of a random map generator right out of the gate will avert those pesky multiplayer disputes over which standard map to use. You can set the parameters for a map, filling it with water and magic sites, or just trust the computer to know what is best. Since the multiplayer game is capable of supporting well over a dozen players, the maps can get very big and a little unbalanced—who wants to get stuck in a wasteland? So players will again be able to design their own maps with a more user-friendly map editor.

This leads straight to the most important issue: While the in-game information is easier to access at all stages of the war, what about the documentation problem? The manual for *Dominions II* was 100 pages of magic spells and items, with minimal information on how to actually amass those 100-fold armies that the AI would regularly smack down by midgame. Will there be "first steps" for new players? An explanation of how the "battle orders" system works? Illwinter has passed the manual off to Bruce Geryk, the author of one of the most comprehensive walkthroughs for the last *Dominions* game [and a contributor to this magazine. –ed]. Given how much *Dominions III* has to offer, and how inscrutable it can be at times, he has quite a job to do.

Dominions 3: The Ascension Wars will be available from Shrapnel Games sometime later this year. Developer Illwinter Games has taken the tried and true stance that it will only be released when it is done. Judging from the work completed so far, this latest war for the souls of the heathens will be happening on a range of new fronts.



Games of Worship



More games than ever are finding religion. As they focus more on conventional gameplay and genres, they face greater scrutiny from Christians and videogame critics alike BY LARA CRIGGER

Jesus is hot. In Hollywood and at book, retail, and record stores, Christian entertainment is burning up the charts. Despite an enormous audience ravenous for religious stories, Christian videogames haven't found the same mainstream popularity as other Christian media. Apparently, Gamestop is the final frontier.

That looks like it's about to change. Emboldened by successes such as *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, a new wave of Christian developers hope to conquer the videogame industry. But it won't be easy. Fighting deep-rooted stereotypes—not to mention the lack of funds endemic to most indie developers—most Christian developers still struggle for credibility. It's time for a drastic change in tactics.

The biggest obstacle facing Christian game makers is a shortage of money. Investors prefer to pump capital into tried-and-true franchises rather than into original content. "They want to play it safe," says Scott Wong, president of Brethren Entertainment. "I don't think it's anti-Christian. It's just economics."

Inadequate funding translates into lower production quality, and the Christian market swells with hundreds of low-budget biblical trivia games and awkward *Bejeweled* clones. Even *Catechumen,* the best-selling Christian game of all time, is remembered more for its dated graphics, design flaws, and questionable combat system than for its gameplay. Most gamers, investors, and even some developers fear new Christian games will never rise above their lackluster predecessors.

Furthermore, secular audiences tend to equate "Christian" with "boring."

"That's the stereotype we have to contend with, that Christian things aren't fun. We know that's not necessarily the case," says Wong. But mainstream audiences remain suspicious, especially when recent offerings like *The Bible Game* offer little compelling evidence to the contrary.

The first step in combating those stereotypes is a change in approach. Instead of targeting Christians interested in videogames, many developers now try to attract gamers interested in Christianity. As Ralph Bagley, president of N'Lightning Software and maker of *Catechumen*, points out, "Even the strongest Christian I know doesn't want a preachy game. He just wants something to escape into and enjoy."

Many developers have also abandoned the trivia games and puzzle knockoffs of yesteryear, reclaiming taboo genres left untouched by previous generations of Christian game makers. In the works are first-person shooters (Boanerges Studios' *Armageddon*), real-time strategy games (Left Behind Games' *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*), and even role-playing titles (Brethren Studios' *Casting the Shadows*).

While producing titles in "gamer" genres could alienate casual consumers, those titles are more likely to reach hardcore gamers. "We're developing our game with the mainstream gamer in mind," says Troy Lyndon, CEO of Left Behind Games. "People will play our game and say, 'Wow, that was a great game.' Not 'Wow, that was a great Christian game.'"

Bagley is confident the experiment will pay off. "We're breaking into all these new genres, and, yeah, you're going to see some weird stuff at first. Not all of it is going to work," he says. "But we're finding our place. As we get more comfortable, the quality will improve."

Still, an interesting dilemma arises: Although these genres do appeal more to gamers, they also tend to feature more mature content. Violence is inescapable in first-person shooter and real-time strategy titles, where gameplay typically revolves around murder, mayhem, and mauling crates. While role-playing games can be subtler, they too tend to stress plotlines involving war and destruction.

This doesn't bother Lyndon. Christian games shouldn't embrace violence just to make sales, he argues, but they shouldn't hesitate to portray aggression if the story demands it. "For some reason, there's this major misconception that Christianity equals passivism. Christians are taught that forgiveness is a central theme, but forgiveness isn't the same thing as absolute defenselessness."

> People will play our game and say, "Wow, that was a great game." Not "Wow, that was a great Christian game." -Troy Lyndon

What's crucial is the context in which the violence takes place. In many Christian games, aggressive action occurs against unredeemable evil entities, such as the demons in N'Lightning's *Ominous Horizons*. When characters do battle humans, as in *Eternal Forces*, they generally have no alternative and act in self-defense.

Jack Thompson, the go-to guy for critiques of videogame violence, thinks con-

Up Front With Left Behind

Left Behind **is the most popular franchise in Christian literature since the Bible; you'd have to live under a very large, possibly satanic rock not to have heard of it. Over 63 million copies of the books have been sold, not to mention the CDs, movies, boardgames, and comic books bearing the name. Now, with Left Behind Games'** ***Left Behind: Eternal Forces*** **scheduled for release this fall, you can add videogame to that list.**

Set in apocalyptic New York City, ***Eternal Forces*** **starts sometime after the Rapture, when Jesus whisked all faithful Christians up to Heaven, stiffing the nonbelievers, who got, well, left behind. The Antichrist has seized power, systematically crushing all who oppose him. You and your small resistance faction, the Tribulation Force, fight for survival, waging urban warfare against the Antichrist's battalions.**

Eternal Forces **promises anywhere from 20 to 40 missions, with up to eight maps in districts like Chinatown, SoHo, and Uptown. It includes over 500 NYC blocks replicated in digital form, ugliness and all.**

At times, it almost seems like parody. For example, while you're saddled with clergymen, missionaries, and folk singers, the Antichrist gets all the politicians, cult leaders, and rock stars. You can summon angels to battle by using ancient power-up scrolls that feature Scripture verses. And when you call soldiers to duty, they pipe up helpfully, "I live to serve believers in Christ!"

As a real-time strategy game, what distinguishes ***Eternal Forces*** **is its emphasis on people as resources, instead of factories or weaponry. Each of the more than 50 units has a back-story, which changes as you play to reflect how you've deployed the units and managed their morale. Through missionaries, you can recruit "neutrals" or even "evil" units to join your side. You need to keep the "faith" of your converts by doing good deeds—or evil ones, depending on which side you're controlling in multiplayer—and you can have your units pray or curse to rally them for battle and help keep them committed to your cause. Seriously.**

Eternal Forces **is intriguing, and it'll be interesting to observe some of the reactions to its gameplay. One question remains, however: Is there an audience? The RTS genre may be too obtuse for some** ***Left Behind*** **fans, and the** ***Left Behind*** **name may scare off some gamers. But with every church in America already lining up to buy copies for its members, it may not matter.**

text is irrelevant. "Because of the Christian context, somehow it's okay?" he asked the *Los Angeles Times*. "It's not okay. The context is irrelevant. It's a mass-killing game. You can be the Christians blowing away the infidels, and if that doesn't hit your hot button, you can be the Antichrist blowing away all the Christians." Thompson, a Christian himself, feels the makers of the game are sacrificing their values to get better sales.

Left Behind author Tim LaHaye disagrees. He told the *Times* that, rather than forbid kids from playing games altogether, he'd "prefer to give them something that's positive."

That positive experience is a bloodless one. Even when shot at point-blank range, enemies in *Eternal Forces* crumple to the ground without a trace of blood, and corpses politely fade out of existence. "We don't need intestines on a doorknob to tell a good story," says Greg Bauman, associate producer of *Eternal Forces*. "We try to set a standard of decency."

However, most secular gamers have been trained to expect blood and gore in games as a realistic consequence of violence, and their omission can be jarring. Bauman is unconcerned that gamers may find bloodless FPS titles less believable.

"Take *Battlefield 2*," he says. "That's a violent game. But if your soldier gets hit with a rocket, he just flies up in the air, and he's gone. We're just doing the same sort of thing."

Although some Christian developers consider limited violence acceptable, almost everyone agrees that sex is off-limits. "It's just not something that needs to be there," says Bagley.

Again, he argues that it's all about the context. "There's fornication, and then there are marital relations. In our games, there's no place for fornication at all," says Bagley. "And marital relations are private, so I don't think showing them would go over well, either."

For Wong, it's more about style. "Even if we wanted to sneak sexual content in there, it doesn't really fit," he says. "Most games we put out just have those natural boundaries." That's not to say that romance itself is forbidden. But allowing people to fill in the blanks themselves, Wong argues, results in a far more stylish and powerful portrayal. "Most people understand what happens," he says. "You don't have to show it."

Moreover, Christian developers face a clear double standard when depicting sex and violence; incensed parents are far more likely to object to the former than the latter. "It's subjective," says Bauman, "and that's the problem." It can be hard, he explains, to determine what's acceptable. Most Christian developers prefer to avoid the issue altogether.

While experimentation in more conventional game genres may lead to greater secular popularity, developers also risk alienating their original fanbase. After all, when small-time developers find mainstream success, certain fans always grumble that it came from selling out. But trying to please everyone rarely succeeds.

"Riding the fence is a lose-lose situation," says Wong. "You never know who you're keeping happy and who you're offending. You should just make your product, and the market will follow."

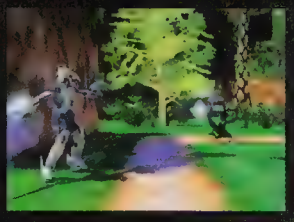
Will it? The question remains whether this next generation of Christian videogames will ever reach a greater audience. Lyndon is bluntly optimistic. "Of course," he says. "If you make a great game, people will play it. Period." ■

Dance Dance Revelation

While tens of thousands of moviegoers flocked to see *The Da Vinci Code* in May, game developers from all over the world were communicating Christian values by sharing a different kind of code. Although Christian games currently represent less than 1% of the gaming market, it appears that their market share will continue to grow.

The consensus reached at the fifth annual Christian Game Developers Conference, held in Portland, Oregon in May, was that, as the *The Da Vinci Code* buzz fades like an old painting left too long in the sun, Christian game developers will find new ways to write code for new and cooler games with an eternal message. In addition to the big gun of Christian gaming, *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, here are a few of the highlights. –Barry W. Kennedy

Axys Adventures: Truth Seeker
Rebel Planet Creations



In the Zelda-like *Axys Adventures* game, you try to save an island's farms from destruction. You have to not only solve various puzzles but also fight hostile plants with your trusty sword. There are over 21 puzzles to solve, including slider, memory, platform, switch, box, and maze puzzles. **rebelplanetcreations.com**

Dance Praise
Digital Praise

Gamers had a blast dancing to various Christian rock artists on this newly released *Dance Dance Revolution*–style game. It received the "Christian Game of the Year" award. **digitalpraise.com**

The Rebel Planet: Orion
Rebel Planet Creations

Here, you play a character trying to find faith in a pre-flood fantasy world. It's an adventure game with RPG elements over seven levels of gameplay. **rebelplanetcreations.com**

Timothy and Titus: Saints, Martyrs, Heroes
White Knight Games

In true *Mario Brothers* style, this game has you jumping from one obstacle to another with the help of your partner. **whiteknightgames.com**

Visions
Visions

This is an MMO set in the second-century Holy Land. Players will be able to play a soldier, mercenary, hunter, potter, baker, entertainer, and more. For those who wish to pursue spiritual enlightenment, there are Bible-based Scripture quests in which you travel backward through biblical history in visions and dreams. **www.visionsgame.com**

"Max, where should I put this so it doesn't hurt anyone we know or care about?" "Out the window, Sam. There's nothing but strangers out there."

Telling Tales, One Episode at a Time

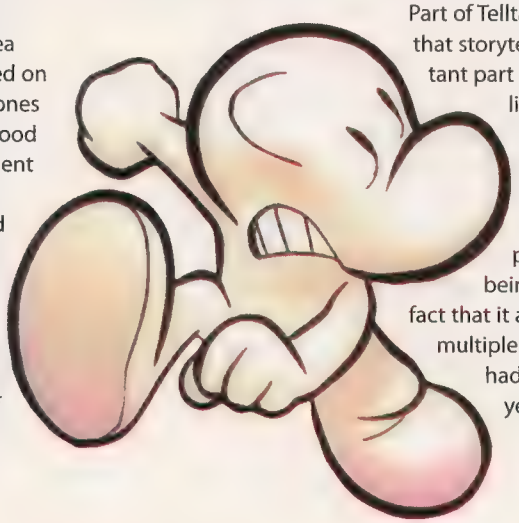
What LucasArts threw out with the bathwater is still afloat at Telltale Games

When LucasArts chose to move away from adventure games, it orphaned the entire genre. Dan Connors, Kevin Bruner, and Troy Mullander—all veterans of LucasArts titles such as *Grim Fandango* and *Sam & Max Hit the Road,* among others—decided it was time to find a way to continue the tradition they'd established at Lucas, so they formed Telltale Games in 2004. They also had the notion that people would want to play games the way they watch their favorite TV shows, in smaller, standalone episodes.

Telltale's goal is to present game players with new kinds of games that feature stories, characters, and episodic content. While episodic games have been more concept than reality until now [for two other examples from Valve and Ritual, see pages 58 and 61], Telltale is convinced it can make the formula work.

"We built our idea around games based on great licenses, but ones that could have a good interactive component where a point-and-click interface could be used to tell a story," says Telltale CEO Dan Connors. One of Telltale's first projects was *CSI: 3 Dimensions of Murder.* Connors says they wanted to make it more interactive than other games based on TV shows. "We've seen reviews that say our point-and-click approach captures the spirit of the license better than, say, the game based on the *24* series."

To the Bone While Telltale was pursuing *CSI,* it also went after the comic book *Bone.* "It was coming out of the comic book space, which is a ripe place for story and new ideas, and it enjoyed considerable cult success," says Connors. "It has been running for 13 to 14 years. This told us a lot."



Part of Telltale's thinking is that storytelling is an important part of what makes any license a success. "We wanted to build a game based on a great story. *Bone* had proven itself as being just that. The fact that it appealed across multiple generations who had been reading it for years showed that it

was a unique property with the potential to be something very special as part of our episodic 'big ideas,'" Connors says.

Bone's creator, Jeff Smith, was surprised. "*Bone* is a comedy adventure, nothing like a first-person shooter or whatever I might have thought a computer game would be," he explains. But when the Telltale founders met Smith, they convinced him to let them make *Bone* interactive. "They wanted to make story- and character-based games, and they explained their ideas of making games in a new, very affordable episodic format," says Smith.

It helped that one of Telltale's artists, Graham Annable, was also a talented cartoonist; his early sketches of the game concept helped convince Smith. "He understood," says Smith. However, it took work to match Telltale's visions with Smith's aesthetics.

"They got the *Bone* characters right away, but with some of the human characters it took some tweaking. By the second game, though, they had it figured out, and I was impressed with the first models they sent in. I was pretty blown away by the Telltale team, and although I contributed in areas of story and visual details, I didn't contribute any game ideas," Smith says. "Not one."

More Bones Telltale has released two games in the *Bone* series, *Out From Boneville* and *The Great Cow Race*. Each plays as an independent game, but they are also related through the use of recurring characters and an ongoing plot. According to Smith, who continues to work closely with Telltale's designers, they're basing the games on the nine volumes of the *Bone* series, though there may only be a handful of games. A larger puzzle exists within those nine volumes—and their accompanying games—that readers and players will be able to uncover.

With two *Bone* games under its belt, Telltale recently announced that it is working on a new series of games based on *Sam & Max*. Telltale promises that a new "season" of *Sam & Max* episodes will begin this fall. Perhaps this is the beginning of a new age of adventure games, ones that feature recurring characters' stories with a strong sense of humor and excellent production values, but also offer a relaxed style of gameplay that's suitable for a wide variety of players. **–Rusel DeMaria**

Behind Sam & Max

Because creative madness knows no boundaries

"There are those who say that madness has a certain sound:

"Holy jumpin' saints o' plenty riding sidewise on a candy-pink fat boy…! An episodic sociopathic lagomorph. The mind boggles."

In Telltale Games' faithfully (re)created, long-awaited *Sam & Max* adventure, they're replicating their police office, their trusty DeSoto, that Bosco guy, and tons more, and they say they've really been stretching their tools to see how far they can go. Ahem. Co-designer Brendon Ferguson offers some deep insight into the process. –Cindy Yans

In your estimation: Sam or Max, and why?
Sam. No reason. No, wait… Max. Same reason. No, wait… Sam with Max's brain, but Liberace's wardrobe. And Kareem's sky hook. Hold on, is this a trick question?

Why do you suppose people actually seem to respect Sam & Max, when they are obviously living somewhere in the outer ozone, way beyond the precepts of decency and normalcy?
Just a guess, but it may have something to do with the large, unregistered firearms they brandish with such obvious abandon. Nothing says, "I deserve your respect" more than a dog and a bunny wielding instruments of death.

Are Sam & Max in a better place now with Telltale than they were with LucasArts?
Are they in a better place? You mean… the great beyond? Oh, quite the contrary. They *were* in a better place, but Telltale sucked them right back down to the worse place. Wait, that doesn't sound good. Let me rephrase. Sam and Max *live*!

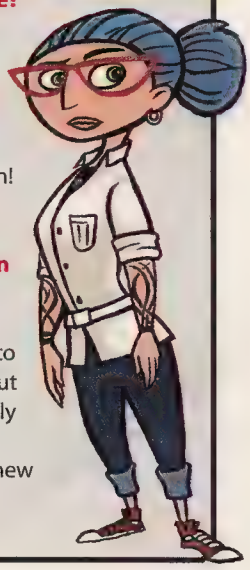
Telltale Intern Deirdra Kiai says that you and Dave [Grossman, S&M's co-designer] often conduct brainstorming sessions while singing and dancing on the conference table. Is this true, and who's the better dancer?
What is truth, really? Idealist philosopher George Berkeley would say that we cannot know what actually *is*, but then he'd probably say that Dave is the better dancer, so what does he know?

Why did you guys decide to go with GameTap as a content distributor? [Like the Bone games, this will be downloadable from Telltale's website.]
Because GameTap has a very similar vision to Telltale's as far as what the future of gaming can be. Turner has been very successful in creating networks, and they are putting a lot of resources into ensuring GameTap is a success. From a content standpoint, they've been great to work with because they trust us to create a great product.

Here's one you're probably sick of… "Why no Stemmle?" [Mike Stemmle was co-developer of LucasArts' last effort to crowbar Sam & Max back into the forefront.]
I'm not sick of it, though I was a little disheartened to hear it from my grandmother when she got my Mother's Day card. While Mr. Stemmle may not be sitting beside me now, he has already given me a far greater gift: a perfect replica of his skull made of the finest cheese. Truly, a source of limitless inspiration.

Has anything at all been lifted from Freelance Police? [LucasArts' last attempt to… er, see above.]
Nope, we're building an all-new adventure from the ground down!

Most importantly, will the game contain navel lint?
Very likely. Naval lint even more likely. Not to give anything away, but guess which aquatically inclined branch of the armed services has a new secret weapon?



NEWSBYTES

Carbon for Carbon-based Life Forms—Electronic Arts announced the next edition of its *Need for Speed* franchise, *Need for Speed Carbon*. It starts in the street, but eventually moves on to canyon racing. One thing's for sure: it will be extremely blingin'.... Slicing Space—Destineer Publishing and Lighthouse Interactive announced a partnership to publish the upcoming 4X sci-fi strategy game *Sword of the Stars*. "We are very pleased to work with proven and experienced groups like Lighthouse and [developer] Kerberos," said Paul Rinde, CEO of Destineer. "*Galactic Civilizations II* re-invigorated this genre and *Sword of the Stars* takes it to an even higher level...." More Half-Life 2 Episodes Announced—Valve announced that it will release the second *Half-Life 2* episode at the end of 2006, with a third part appearing by Christmas of 2007. Can you wait that long? AA for MMOs, FPSs, and RTSs—The first detox clinic for videogame addicts opened in Amsterdam in July, according to the Associated Press. Keith Bakker, director of the clinic, says videogames can be as addictive as gambling or narcotics, which surely amuses heroin addicts to no end. "We have kids who don't know how to communicate with people face-to-face because they've spent the last three years talking to somebody in Korea through a computer," Bakker told AP. "Their social network has completely disappeared...."

Gas-Powered Future

Broken World seeks to right the wrongs of the original Dungeon Siege 2, and Gas Powered Games looks into the future

Daniel Achterman is the designer on *Dungeon Siege 2: Broken World*, and he's certain that everything he and his team wanted to do with this expansion to the popular party-based click-and-slash game was accomplished. "We wanted to take the player off auto-pilot," he says of this 3D role-playing click-fest.

Something's just wrong about using a crossbow six inches away.

To do that, says Achterman, the Gas Powered Games team is adding new enemy behaviors and skills that force players to change their tactics. These include poisonous clouds that spray out from corpses, minions that must be destroyed before the big baddie can be harmed, and kamikaze monsters that explode on contact.

The two new character classes add some spunk to these newly difficult battles as well. The Stone Fist is all about crowd control and beating the tar out of clusters of monsters, while the Blood Assassin offers her own powerful attacks that can be triggered after targeting a slew of monsters individually.

Now that the development process is finally nearing its end, GPG is preparing for a major expansion. The company is getting ready to announce a new project that looks to be based on existing intellectual property. Unfortunately, no one can talk about it beyond saying that the folks at GPG are excited to be working on this midlife project. There are also rumors of a *Dungeon Siege 3*, but that won't be discussed until *Supreme Commander* nears completion.

Of course, they're also readying themselves for the release of the *Dungeon Siege* movie, directed by Uwe Boll. They're contractually obligated to speak well of the coming film, which features Burt Reynolds and Ray Liotta. Stay tuned, though: Once the film is released, they can talk smack about Dr. Boll and his obsession with collecting dogs. **–Alex Handy**

QUOTABLES

"Too many game creators listen to requests from existing gamers who simply want beefed-up versions of existing games."

–Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto, explaining why he felt the industry was going through a sales slump

"Remember, no fanboyism. If something happens, polite clapping is enough."

–Comment from an unnamed blogger, as overheard and reported by Washington Post blogger Mike Musgrove, prior to the start of Nintendo's press conference at this May's Electronic Entertainment Expo.

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ALL ABOARD!

SID MEIER'S RAILROADS: USES NEW TECHNOLOGY & GAMEPLAY TO REVISIT FAMILIAR TERRITORY

BY TOM CHICK

The people at Firaxis are nothing if not informal. They're projecting a demo of *Sid Meier's Railroads!* on a whiteboard in one of their meeting rooms. An eraser tray sticks out from the lower righthand corner of the game.

At its core, *Railroads!* is another update of *Railroad Tycoon*, with many improvements. Like previous versions, it places you in the leather-soled shoes of a 19th-century robber baron—er, "captain of industry"—working toward utter domination of the American trainscape. As a railway mogul, it's your job to build track and stations to connect the various industries and cities that dot the map and to efficiently and, at times, ruthlessly run your business.

The maps so far are the Northeast U.S., the Southwest U.S., France, Germany, and the U.K. Firaxis is considering the Central U.S. and Pacific Northwest. Each map has about 10 to 12 resources. All of them have goods in common, like passengers, mail, grain, and food. But only France has grapes and wine, and only Germany has beer. Each map has an "über-good" at the top of the resource tree. In the U.S. and Germany, it's automobiles. In France and the U.K., it's arms. They're thinking of gold for the Southwest.

When producer Dan Magaha starts a game in the Northeast, he points out how small the map is. "It's not like the original [*Railroad Tycoon*] game. Those maps were huge. This map is not so huge. It goes from New York City in one corner to Washington, D.C. in the other corner." There's a giant eraser tray looming over D.C.

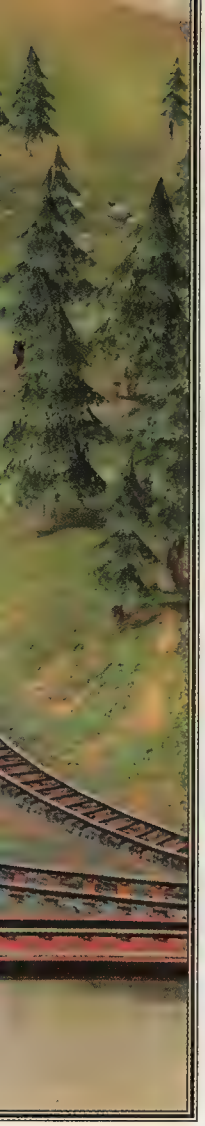
"We want you to always have interesting stuff onscreen," says Magaha. "We're still playing with the scale, figuring out what's too close. But there are no dead spaces where you're bored and there's nothing to do."

"THE **INDUSTRIES** AND **CITIES BUSTLE** AND HUM WITH **AS MUCH ACTIVITY** AS THE **ARTISTS** CAN WRING FROM THE **3D GRAPHICS**."

The industries and cities bustle and hum with as much activity as the artists can wring from the 3D graphics. Zoom-in on a sawmill to watch it eat trees and roll out finished logs onto piles waiting to be picked up. A newspaper building with a spinning globe on top shows that a city demands paper. There are fields of grain, each a carload, with tractors nosing through them.

The idea is to give the world of *Railroads!* easy-to-read cues for the economy. Icons show what every city and industry demands and supplies, of course, but there are other visual indicators. For instance, oil fields erect derricks for each carload of their capacity, and whenever a carload of oil is available, oil spouts from the top of the derrick. So a field with four derricks can produce a maximum of four oils. If they're all spurting, it's maxed out and waiting for a train to come by.

Click on the oil field, and the minimap shows every place that demands oil. Along the edges of the screen, little circles pop up in the direction of places demanding oil, clearly labeled with the name of the place and its distance from your current location. Click the little circle to jump there. (It's worth noting that Firaxis recently hired Scott Lewis, who implemented the interfaces for *Rise of Nations* and *Rise of Legends*.)



"We want the world to be alive," Magaha says. "I know that's kind of a cliché, but it ties in with the whole model railroad thing. That's where we started from. That people just love making layouts."

And it's not just resources and cities that determine your layout. Once you figure out how tracks work, you'll look at the natural terrain differently. Rivers, mountains, and valleys are just as much a part of the gameplay as Baltimore, that grain farm, and those oil fields.

Click on a bit of existing track and move the mouse. "Click, click, click, and the track goes where you want it to go," says Magaha. A ghosted track shows the cost of laying the route, and the terrain deforms in real time to show you how the track will affect the land. There's information about the grade and the speed limit for a train traversing the location of the cursor. Move over a river, and the cost of the ghosted bridge will factor in. Click down into a valley to descend and then come up the other side, or drag over it to check the price of a bridge. Move around the base of a mountain to skirt it, or poke right through it to buy a tunnel.

"We want more vertical terrain for interesting decisions," Magaha says. "Do you go around or go through mountains? One of the very first things the PopTop guys [who made *Railroad Tycoon II*] told us was, 'Please put in tunnels, because the Germans hated us for not having tunnels.'"

The train museum lets you browse available engines. If you've played previous train games, it's a joy to see these detailed models of the usual suspects: the Grasshopper, Norris, American, 10-Wheeler, Consolidation, all the way up to diesel trains and TGVs. There are going to be "a little over 40 engines" in *Railroads!* You can customize your engine color and even add logos to them.

Magaha buys an engine, clicks on the city where he wants to begin his route, and selects carloads from among the available goods. He selects a destination, selects cars there, and he's done. Simply repeat as desired for multistop routes. Then there's massaging your routes to make them profitable. Drop signals onto your tracks to essentially break them into sections where trains will wait for the tracks to clear ahead. You can double- and triple-track heavily traveled areas. Build improvements at your stations.

Since Magaha has been demo-ing the game instead of playing in earnest, the computer players have shut him out. Laying track over another player's railroad is

SID MEIER SPEAKS!

On trains:
Model trains are your first God game, when you're growing up. You get to create this whole world around your Christmas tree or on your floor. The cool thing about trains is that they move and you have to pull a few switches and you're creating this working world. With cars, you push them and go "vroom." It's not quite the same. Trains are a kid's first experience with being God.

On games being childish:
All the games I've done have connected to things I got interested in when I was a kid, whether it was the Civil War, or railroads, or airplanes. When you're a kid, every time you turn a page, there's some cool new discovery. "Oh wow, that battle. I wonder who's going to win Gettysburg? I better keep reading!" Once you're an adult, you kind of know all the answers and it's not that exciting to read the book because you know who's going to win the battle of Gettysburg. But when you play the game, you don't know who's going to win. So it's kind of like recapturing that voyage of discovery you get as a kid when you dive into a new topic.

There's a lot of connection to childhood in gaming. Just that idea of wanting to grow up and wanting to go somewhere you can't go in real life. Most of us don't get to be kings. Most of us don't get to own a railroad. We're always trying to have experiences bigger than our real life. That starts as a kid.

On explaining *CPU Bach*:
***CPU Bach*... umm... is a piece of software... that creates music... somewhat in the style of Bach. Basically, you just press a button that says "Start creating music," and music starts playing, and... uhh... why would anyone want to create a piece of software like that? That's one we don't get a lot of requests for [laughs].**

The way I rationalize it is, I had just finished *Civilization*. It had been successful. I didn't want to try to top that game somehow. You can get into this "top yourself" rut. I knew my head would just explode if I tried to go, you know, "Game Even Grander and More Strategic." And I was interested in this whole problem of music composition on a computer. And the 3DO came out. And they said [faux English accent], "Oh, changing the way people view entertainment. It will now be sophisticated people sitting around in the living room with their 3DOs, doing sophisticated things that have never been done before." And I thought, "I bet they want music composition. And they'll probably enjoy Bach. Because they're sophisticated."

It was a... fun... thing, and when I came out of it, I was ready to move on to making more games.

On *SimGolf*:
I go on vacation to Michigan, and included in our camp package once was one day of golf. So I dragged the family out to play golf and we were terrible, and it took eight hours to play nine holes or whatever. My wife didn't want to play, she hates golf, but she brought along drinks, and she was driving the cart around. So she had a great experience and the rest of us were having a terrible time.

A couple months later, she was at this charity auction. There's a golf tournament here in Baltimore, it's a senior tour, a champions tour. Up for auction was this foursome in the Pro Am. Maybe she was drinking or something, I don't know, I wasn't there, which was a really big mistake. So she walked in the house with this senior tour bag, and I said, "Oh, they were giving away those really cool bags?" And she said, "Well, they weren't exactly giving 'em away."

So she spent this amazing amount of money on this thing, and she said, "But you're going to get to play with pros." But I could, I don't know, kill somebody out there. So I had to take lessons, I had to practice. And I started to really enjoy it. And now it's something fun to do. I think that's when the *SimGolf* thing came up. In hindsight, I'm glad she did it.

"WE WANT **THE WORLD** TO **BE ALIVE**," MAGAHA SAYS. "IT TIES-IN WITH THE WHOLE **MODEL RAILROAD THING**."

possible but expensive. "When I gave this demo previously, we had the AI disabled, and it was a much more serene, peaceful world," Magaha says, squeezing between Cornelius Vanderbilt and J.P. Morgan. When he finally quits, he gets what Firaxis has come to call the "Dan Quayle screen," after one of the lowest rankings in *Civilization*. "You're no better than a dirty stinkin' hobo!" it taunts.

Next up is a four-player game. "We don't have tank rushes, so we need another way to have conflict and hostility," Magaha says. "That's where the stock market comes in. One of the latest changes we made was to start everyone with less money, but a little stock. You can sell your stock for more starting money, but you'll be vulnerable. Or you can hold onto it."

SID MEIER SPEAKS!

On playing MMOs:
I see them as this really intensive time investment that doesn't really appeal to me. The persistent aspect, well, I don't have the persistence to exist in a persistent world.

On what's next:
I'm working on a couple of different things, *Railroads* being one of them; we also have some other projects going on.
TOM CHICK: Prototyping?
SID: I live to prototype. *Civ* has always been a great toolbox for this. There's a hundred other games in there somewhere. There are three or four prototypes for every game we do.
SOREN JOHNSON [Civilization IV designer]: At some point we need to release "Sid Meier's Hard Drive."

On real-time strategy games:
I think there's a life-cycle that holds true for just about every genre. There's one or two innovative or creative games that kick off the genre. Then there's a couple of games that really perfect it. They add graphics or interface and build

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AT PLAY AT FIRAXIS

IF YOU COULD PLAY A GAME WITH ANY FAMOUS GAME DESIGNERS, WHAT WOULD YOU PLAY? SID MEIER AND SOREN JOHNSON SIT DOWN WITH OUR WRITER FOR A GAME OF TICKET TO RIDE BY TOM CHICK

Early on, Sid Meier connects the route between New York and Washington. Then Soren Johnson connects Boston to Washington. A couple of turns later, they're tangled up with each other in the Northeast.

I, on the other hand, have tickets in the West, which remains untrammeled by trains. While they tussle with each other, I will take my time building up.

"Is your reign of terror over, Sid?" Soren asks.

Sid replies slowly. "I don't understand why building a railroad to connect the people of Montreal to the rest of the world is terror."

I'm playing Ticket to Ride with Sid Meier and Soren Johnson. We're in a conference room at the top of a squat brown-brick high-rise in Hunt Valley, Maryland. Firaxis' offices take up the top three stories. Firaxis has cut a giant hole in the middle of each floor and run through the holes a staircase that looks like it belongs in someone's cottage.

Sitting here is a bit daunting. To my left is the creator of *Civilization*, and to my right is the developer of its most recent and most ingenious incarnation. But they claim they don't really know *Ticket to Ride*, a train game that combines collecting sets of cards with a simple map. This is a copy of the game Soren recently bought, and it's never been used before. He says he's played six or seven games online, "the first three being completely, 'What am I doing?'" he adds. At one point, Sid comments, "We should be playing *1830*." But they quickly get into the swing of it.

Earlier, Soren had explained the game to Sid, tossing out rules in a desultory way that would probably confuse the average newcomer. I considered stepping in to explain it better but realized that I had no business presuming to know how "better" would go. These guys have been working together for years. They know how to talk to each other.

As we started, Sid pulled out three of his red trains and lined them up on the table in front of him, neatly placing them end to end and obviously delighted with the tactility of it all. He boldly kept all three tickets, which are the goals you have to meet at the end of the game. Soren and I, not nearly so optimistic, kept only two of ours. As we play, neither of them is very attentive to moving their score markers. "Is it my turn?" is a commonly asked question. You get the sense that they're in this for the experience of playing rather than for the win.

"When we did the original *Railroad Tycoon*, we did a lot of *1830*," Sid says. "At that time, we had a weekly boardgame group. These days, I play mostly computer games." When Sid talks, there's something reassuring about his voice. He has the patient and soft-spoken enunciation of Fred Rogers. He's carefully arranging his cards, struggling with the whole "canasta hand" dynamic you get trying to save up a few dozen cards to lay long routes. He still hasn't touched the little chain of three cars he put in front of him when the game started.

"I've heard people say *Memoir '44* is good," Soren says.

"It's so beer and pretzels," I say. It's simply a dice-and-card-driven tactical WWII game. I tell him Days of Wonder is developing an online version. The company is putting its boardgames online where people can try them for free, hoping they'll like the games enough to buy an actual hard copy. It's relying on people who delight in the tactileness of it all, like Sid with his neat line of three red trains.

"I would have never bought this without having played the online version," Soren says. "I'd heard about that business model and thought it was kind of iffy. But with boardgames, you have to spend 40 or 50 bucks on the assumption that you'll like it."

After the initial clash around Washington, Sid's and Soren's routes go their own ways. Sid goes south along the Eastern seaboard, down to Miami, and then swinging west along the Gulf Coast. Soren connects the long stretches between Duluth, Helena, and Seattle. I've got a sort of messy Midwestern zigzag going. "It's very polite the way Soren's come over the top, Sid's coming along the bottom, and you guys are leaving me alone in the middle," I note.

"Yeah, Sid and I had that moment early on," Soren says.

"I thought it was going to be a bloodbath," I say. "That's the thing I hate about the stations in the European map. A lot of that cutthroat stuff is gone."

"It's a lot more frustrating," Soren says. "I especially find the tunnel dynamic to be really stupid. There's a lot of those rules in the Europe map that feel like rules people suggest to us for *Civilization*. 'Hey, every time you have a battle, it should

zoom in and there should be cards…' That kind of stuff."

I draw new tickets and get ambitious, supposing I can connect Nashville to Portland. Sid takes new tickets as well.

"The thing I've never understood," Soren says, "is how the game ends. Online, it's like suddenly 'pfft.'"

I explain that it ends when one player uses up his trains. "So, if you're clearly in the lead at this point, you can just shut down the game by burning your trains. Please don't do that yet. I still have big plans for these cards."

Now Sid has grabbed Los Angeles to Las Vegas and Salt Lake City to Helena. I'm hopelessly behind, chasing blue cards for the Salt Lake City to Helena connection. My only hope is to block Sid and come in in second place. "He made me do this, Sid," I apologize. "The most I can do is keep you from getting points, so I'm taking Las Vegas to Salt Lake City."

Sid laughs softly and lays down a connection from Salt Lake City to Calgary. He finally uses the last of his trains, taking the three little red cars he'd set out when we started.

"Boy, that worked out perfect for me," Soren says, dropping a short route to Atlanta. "That was the last connection I needed to make Atlanta to San Francisco."

We're counting up our scores now, which is always messy. "I need to play more *Brain Age*," Soren says after he mis-adds his score a second time.

"So, did that mess you up?" I ask Sid about my endgame block.

"No, I had Calgary to Salt Lake City."

"Oh, you didn't even have to go there?"

"I would have needed it for longest train bonus," Sid says. It turns out that, if Soren hadn't dropped his last two trains to Atlanta, not only would he have lost the points for the ticket, but Sid would have had the longest route and won the game. Instead, Soren gets 134 points to Sid's 116 points.

"I drew Portland to Nashville," I explain. "I don't know what I was thinking. I just figured I'm all over the place and I'll just work it in there. I'm a terrible railroader. That's 17 points lost to bad geography." Not that it would have mattered. My score at the end is a measly 63 points.

And frankly, I wouldn't have had it any other way. I can't think of two guys I'd be more honored to lose to. ■

"It's a bit like the choice between booming or turtling," Lewis says from the opposite corner of the map.

"One of the things we see in our multiplayer games is everyone rushing to buy stock in the best player," Magaha says. "It adds this whole other metagame, which is what some of the robber barons actually did. Some of them didn't know the first thing about railroads. They just knew money."

Everyone starts with his own hub town in one of the four corners of the map. Lead programmer Don Wuenschell begins at Baltimore, in a corner that's closed-in by rivers but has a coal mine next to it. Nearby Frederick wants coal. But the industries are randomized to a certain extent, so Baltimore may not always be able to count on that coal mine.

SID MEIER SPEAKS!

continued from page 38

on the experience of the first ones. And then you get into the tail of the curve where it's like the *Falcon* phenomenon. They get more complex.

TOM: Falcon?

SID: *Falcon*, the flight simulator. If you haven't played [the first six] *Falcon* games, you have no chance of playing *Falcon 7*. Because hardcore game players are demanding more complexity, more depth, more whatever. And it doesn't allow anyone else to get into the genre. I think RTSs may be not quite there, but I think the innovation quotient is a little bit, well… [shrugs].

On making shooters:

There's a lot of technology involved in making those work. The technology/gameplay ratio tends towards the technology there. That's not really the balance we look for here at Firaxis.

On making an MMO:

They're something I'm interested in, but there's a barrier to entry of millions and millions of dollars. High costs generally inhibit creativity. I would like to do an MMO that's different from the current model. It's probably not going to happen any time soon.

On the cancelled dinosaur game:

We did three different versions of it, and at a certain point we said, "This is not happening." There was a turn-based version, an RTS version, and a card-game version, almost *Magic the Gathering* with dinosaur cards. They were all kind of cool, but dinosaurs is a topic that requires an awesome game. They didn't come up to the awesome level. Rather than burn our dinosaur card, we're going to save it for when we have something awesome.

SID MEIER'S CONSOLES!

SID: On PCs, we tend to have the game happen in your head. That's cool, but it requires you to be willing to invest, to spend time figuring out what's happening. In console games, you're entertained right away. We're trying to combine the depth and the strategy of good PC gaming with the entertainment and smooth entry that consoles give. We're looking forward to Vista. I hope there's a time when you can just put the disk in and the game comes up.

TOM: Do you look routinely at console games?
SID: Oh yeah, we play a lot of them.
SOREN: You can't ignore them anymore.
SID: I played a lot of *Gran Turismo 3*.
SOREN: He was totally hooked on that game. That was insane. That was during the end of *Civilization III*. I remember leaving the office at 1 or 2 a.m. on a Friday or Saturday or whatever. He was playing it. And I come back in the next day at like 11, and he's still playing it. I'm like, "Did you go home, Sid?"
SID: You don't want to be driving home after playing that game.

TOM: So it was to get the licenses? To collect cars? All of it?
SID: The licenses I needed to continue. It was more opening up the next race, opening up the next level of car. It had a great progression, there was always something to reach for. That got me interested in all the racing games, so I played [*Gran Turismo*] *4* and *Forza*.
SOREN: I think it would always be cool to find out what games well-known game designers play that you don't expect them to.
TOM: Of those you tried, was *GT3* your favorite?
SID: They all had some really great aspects. *GT3* was the first one, so it's probably my favorite even though *GT4* is more advanced in some ways. The elegance of the game design was really cool in that game. *Call of Duty 2* is another game that really, on the 360, impressed me.

TOM: Why did you find yourself playing that on the 360 instead of the PC?
SID: Push the disk in, you're sitting in your easy chair, press some buttons, and you're having fun. It's so easy to do. You don't have to boot up, wait for Bill Gates to authorize you to use your computer or whatever it is. You know, waiting for all that stuff to happen.
SOREN: The keyboard and mouse will always be better for shooters, but there's definitely something about that.
SID: And I'm playing on the big screen.

TOM: What else have you seen lately?
SOREN: I'm playing mostly DS games. I love my DS.

TOM: The DS Lite?
SOREN: I don't have a Lite.

TOM: You don't have the Lite yet?
SOREN: It's only, what, two weeks?

TOM: You're not an early adopter.
BARRY [Caudill, Firaxis senior producer]: I'm not going to buy the white one. I want a colored one.
SOREN: You don't have a Lite yet?
BARRY: No, not yet.
SOREN: We've been debating this. Who are these people who buy the Lite right away? I think it's mostly just people who love their DS and they're tired of other people using it.
BARRY: I'll have to buy one because I'm going to give mine to my son. He plays *Animal Crossing* every day.

TOM: So he gets the hand-me-down DS.
BARRY: Right, but I don't want the early-adopter "Here's the color that you get" [one]. I want to choose my color this time.
SOREN: Plus, if you've got two, you've got the great multiplayer stuff.

TOM: That must be something you guys think about. I know it's not officially announced, but you're doing a game for the PSP.
SID: I think when we first looked at the PSP, we thought, "Look at the resolution and the colors and the interface! We can take 18 games that we wrote in the '70s...."
SOREN: *The Sid Meier Pack*.

TOM: I constantly hear that *Civ* on a handheld would be a strategy nirvana.
SOREN: I would think so on the DS. It was really interesting to see the *Age of Empires* game. It was one of the few times I've seen a genre jump like that [from real-time to turn-based format] where it actually helped. I know the technology advances, I knew what the units were, so I felt like, "OK, I already kind of know this game, so I can just have fun with it."

Unfortunately, it made a couple of really strange decisions that prevented it from rising to the level of *Advance Wars*. I would have preferred that game over *Advance Wars* if they had just cut the maps in half and ditched the terrible isometric view. I need to be able to click on my units. How can you get around that? But obviously turn-based strategy works very well on a DS.
SID: OK, so what's the back catalog of our turn-based strategy games?

TOM: What sort of things do you get requests for? I know a lot of people talk about *Covert Action*, for instance. What requests do you get?
SOREN: It was *Pirates*.
SID: *Railroads* and *Pirates* were the two we used to get a lot.
BARRY: *Covert Action*.

TOM: I got the impression that it was kind of a sleeper thing that not many people even know about. But you hear about that a lot?
SID: Oh yeah.
SOREN: It's a great topic. Think of a spy strategy game. It's just not out there. All of the spy games are shooters.
BARRY: Well, there's the *Covert Action* effect that Sid always talks about.
SID: One of our rules of game design is based on what not to do. We call it the *Covert Action* rule. It's putting too much stuff into a game. With *Covert Action*, we were like, "We'll have this really cool international intrigue plot where you have to uncover the clues, and then you'll go into this action sequence, and then you'll chase this car around, and you'll decode this message...."

And you start playing, and you lose track as you're going. "What was the problem again? What am I after? There's people throwing grenades at me and I'm trying to sneak out of this building...." It was just too much.
SOREN: The minigames were probably just too long.
SID: They were too intensive. When you finished them, you had to kind of start over again and ask, "OK, what was my mission?" *Pirates* did a much better job with the right amount of time for sword fighting or a ship battle or whatever. And overall, it wasn't as complicated. You had one or two goals. You weren't trying to remember red herrings or fit clues together. *Covert Action* was a nice try. We could do better.
KELLEY [Gilmore, Firaxis director of marketing]: Yes, we *could* do better!
SID: We have to mention *Guitar Hero*. We play a lot of *Guitar Hero*.

TOM: Did you see that one coming? How did you first hear about *Guitar Hero*?
SID: I'd kind of heard about it, but we walked into a game store, and they said, "Oh, these are going fast, but this is the last one we have," and I said, "Oh, we gotta have it." My son, Ryan, plays guitar, and I like music. It was something we were already interested in.

TOM: Are you very good at it?
SID: I can get up to the third level. I can add the fifth button, but not too often. Ryan beat it on the highest level. He spent hours. It's probably one of his greatest achievements in life so far, in terms of the amount of time invested and the intensity of the experience [laughs].

TOM: What's your favorite song?
SID: We like "More Than a Feeling."

TOM: "We"? He's too young to know that song.
SID: I taught him to appreciate it. He can play it without even looking at the screen.
SOREN: It's funny how the best games always seem so obvious after the fact.
SID: Someone said to me, "Why didn't we do that game?"

Multiplayer games might seem awfully esoteric at first. Why is that guy worth so much more money than you? Why are you grabbing so few of the available passengers? And what's the deal with this crazy stock stuff? The room erupts in shouts when there's a fortuitously timed stock crash, followed by a rush on buying.

"Yeah, we're going to have to get that on the main screen," says Lewis of the interface to buy and sell stock. Right now, you have to jump to a separate screen.

Rushing would probably be the equivalent of what Lewis does when he makes a beeline for Philadelphia early on. It's in the center of the map, and by the end of the game, all four players are plugged into it. Everyone's pouring goods into Philadelphia. "Actually, we're cannibalizing each other," says Wuenschell. "But it's a matter of hurting yourself to hurt someone else, too. Is it worth it?" He shrugs.

Shortly thereafter, Lewis buys out Wuenschell's company, inheriting stretches of congested railway. It sends Lewis's maintenance costs skyrocketing and almost gives lead programmer Casey O'Toole a chance to catch up.

IF YOU'VE PLAYED PREVIOUS TRAIN GAMES, IT'S A JOY TO SEE THESE DETAILED MODELS OF THE USUAL SUSPECTS.

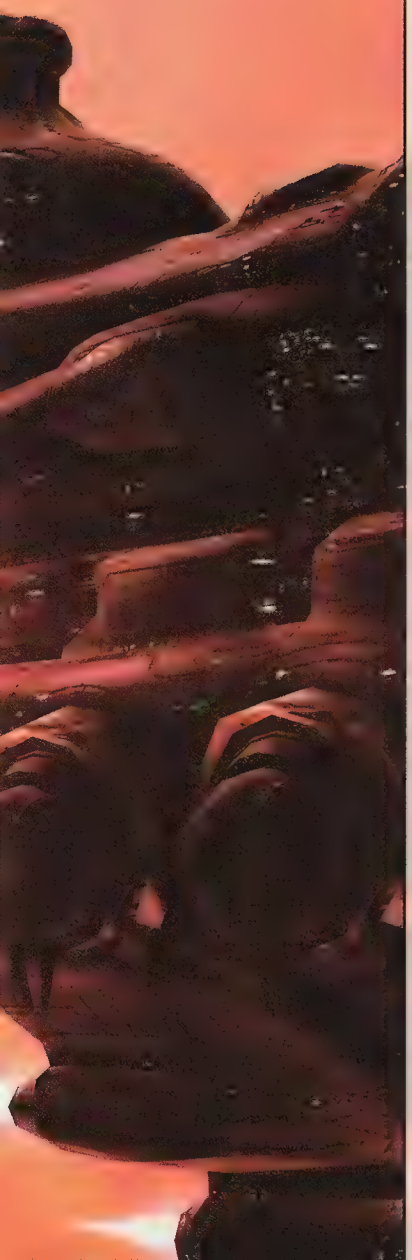
Now resigned to the role of defeated spectator, Wuenschell is looking over his rail lines while Lewis sells off the less profitable routes. "The later eras are faster and more aggressive," he says. "You don't worry so much about steep grades, because you're not dealing with Grasshoppers struggling up hills."

In the end, Lewis got too much headway going and bought everyone else out after about 45 minutes. It was brutish, nasty, short, and exactly what you'd expect from four people playing robber baron. ■

the NONCON

All About EVE (Online): How a corporate space odyssey rewards the pop-economist in all of us BY MARK WALLACE

formist



Massively multiplayer online game developers like to talk about the quality of "immersion," that state in which you're so involved with your character that it's hard to tell the two of you apart. But how does one acquire this elusive quality? Is it through character-creation interfaces? Realistic emotes? Motion-capture animations? Extremely detailed avatars?

When you tell hardcore players that the most immersive MMO currently available is *EVE Online*, most laugh. "*EVE* is nothing but a massively multiplayer spreadsheet," some say. "The tutorial alone was enough to put me to sleep."

But with CCP Games' upcoming *Kali* expansion, the qualities of *EVE* that make it so compelling—which, by the way, include none of the things mentioned above—should only get deeper.

While it's true that *EVE* is a numbers-heavy game, and that the tutorial is exceptionally tedious (aside from the sultry tones of the Aura computer), it does offer players one thing in greater measure than perhaps any other game: control over their destiny. Though your avatar is only a head-and-shoulders portrait and is never actually seen outside a spaceship or life-support pod, the hundreds of skills that can be trained in the game's classless progression system allow you to tweak your areas of expertise as finely as you like. And that's only the beginning. Once you get into the game, the range of choices with which you're presented is so wide—and the signposts so few and far between—that it scares many people away. For those who stay, though, *EVE* provides the opportunity to immerse yourself in your character like almost no other game.

So what do you do in a game with no levels, no classes, hardly any storyline, and almost no goals? Whatever you want. While *EVE* is basically a rock-paper-scissors space western—challenging players to pick from among the thousands of modules that can be fitted to the hundreds of ships in the game to create the most über version of whatever they're flying—it's really about its players. Most of the 5000-star galaxy in which *EVE* takes place is open PvP—kill or be killed, no questions asked—but combat, it turns out, is not necessarily the biggest part of the game. You can spend practically your entire *EVE* existence without firing a shot, if you like. While you can pick up engaging missions from the NPC executives in the game (with a new round of such content coming in *Kali*), even these revolve around the true beating heart of *EVE*: its economy.

The game's 300 plus starships will be joined by these: the Abaddon, Apocalypse, Executioner and the Impairor, which looks rather like a needle-nosed dolphin...

CCP says it has over 100,000 subscribers, and they all fly around in the same beautifully rendered, nonsharded world. (*EVE* is the only game that looks better on your screen than in screenshots.) Up to a quarter of those players are often logged on at once. With only one world and so many players in it, *EVE* doesn't have the luxury of providing a small amount of content and reusing it across shards, says CEO Hilmar Petursson. So, to solve the problem of content creation, CCP simply outsources it to its players. "We've always believed in user-created content, but not in the form of people modeling in Maya and uploading the mesh to the game," Petursson says. "It's more the dynamics of society and the market system."

EVE's Nasdaq-like market puts players in the pilot's seat. If you have a mind to, you can mine, manufacture, and/or sell everything from raw materials to module components to ship fittings and parts to entire starships and space stations. NPC prices change on the fly according to what players put on the market, and you can even speculate on price changes and try to corner the market on a particular item—if you have the capital to risk.

Head East, young pod pilot

By now, CCP Games will most likely have launched its first *EVE Online* shard, creating a mirror galaxy that will be available to players in China, one of the biggest MMO markets in the world. With the entire text of the game being ported over to Chinese characters, there will be little appeal for Western players. But CCP's dev team has presented one fascinating prospect: The company has considered the possibility of merging or connecting the two galaxies via a yet-to-be-discovered stargate at some point in the future. That is, if Chinese players don't object to being invaded by American and European macro-miners, *EVE*'s version of gold farmers.

As in any good capitalist society, *EVE*'s markets are what drive its conflicts. They make it possible to play as a peaceful miner or manufacturer, but they also drive the PvP combat that takes place in the unpoliced reaches of the galaxy. Without any experience points to earn, the only thing that stands between you and that faction navy battleship you've been drooling over is cash. But the richest ores and most valuable NPC pirates can only be found in "alliance space," where there are no NPC cops to punish aggressors. As a result, long-running player wars are waged for control of valuable regions, pitting alliances with thousands of players against each other for weeks and sometimes months at a time.

It's here, in the zero-security systems that make up three-quarters of *EVE*'s geography, that things really get good. Not only do *EVE* players have unprecedented control over themselves, but they have a similar impact on their world. Gain sovereignty over a resource-rich region, and you might hold it for a year or more, if you can fend off your enemies. The game doesn't schedule any raids against you, though other players certainly will, and when you least expect it.

Or you may find that your downfall begins within your own ranks. The politics of holding an alliance together is a game in itself, and turncoats, espionage, and bitter rivalries are all part of the fun. Great empires rise and fall—and your elation and agony with them—and none of it is written by the game's developers.

A new graphics engine, named "Trinity II," will take full advantage of the features and optimizations offered by DirectX 10.

Your history is marked out not by the prearranged quests you've completed or the bosses you've killed, but by the completely emergent situations you've lived—or died—through. Your *World of WarCraft* guild may have slain Onyxia a dozen times, but that's nothing compared with the experience of defeating a thousand-ship alliance so thoroughly that it fragments into lone member corporations. Or of being trounced so hard that you're forced to leave the pod pilots you've flown and fallen with and move your corp halfway across the galaxy, your tail between your legs.

Of course, such drama isn't for everyone. For those who want to be taken by the hand and guided through their gameworld, there's always *World of WarCraft*, where another quest is always just around the corner to get you closer to your grinding goal. If *WoW* is the most accessible MMO in history, *EVE* is in many ways its polar opposite. That hasn't stopped it from tracking steady growth over the three years it's been around. How can *EVE* hope to compete with a category-killer like *WoW*, which now boasts more than six million subscribers?

"For us, *WoW* has done more positive than negative," says Petursson. "It's introduced a lot of people to the [MMO] genre."

Kali, to be rolled out in phases beginning this summer, should help introduce a lot more people to *EVE*. Besides remodeling the game's already gorgeous ships in even higher resolution, the expansion aims to give players' actions still more of an impact on the world around them. While details are scarce at the moment, it looks as if the NPC factions in the game will begin to react more closely to the political shifts among player alliances. It's a risky tactic, as it could throw off the balance that's been created among the players themselves. But the *EVE* team sees it as a way to put even more of the galaxy under the sway of their customers.

In fact, it sounds like *Kali* may toss a bit more traditional MMO content into the *EVE* mix. Those who don't care to join the PvP alliances in deep space will be able to align themselves more closely with the NPC factions and thus to get involved in the large-scale operations that make *EVE* so much fun without being forced to venture out to the frontier. *Kali* will provide new skills with which to discover and develop the new technologies that are constantly being seeded into the game and even, for the first time, ways to reverse-engineer some ships and components.

Kali also offers new star systems to the *EVE* galaxy. Imagine jumping your covert ops Buzzard through a stargate that leads to the Jove systems, province of a mysterious and powerful race that's been cut off from the main part of *EVE* and never visited by players.

So will *Kali* bring people to Jove space? Petursson smiles before answering, "If I told you that, I would have to kill you." ■

why we play EVE

Diary of an Alliance Shattered

It started with the spies on our TeamSpeak channel. Our alliance held one of the richest regions of deep space, and the "pipe" that led up to Empire—where we'd go to buy new ships and ammo under the watchful eye of the Concord NPC police—was constantly harassed by enemies. Most of the time, it wasn't a problem. There was good intel and always a helpful pilot around when you needed an escort. But whenever we got a fleet together to strike our foes where they lived, there was always a larger fleet waiting.

Once they'd compromised our communication channels, we started getting "blobbed." Fleets of huge enemy ships would close in on key locations, making bright blobs of color on the map. For months we fought them to a standstill, but each time it looked like we might gain a real advantage, the enemy just logged off. It was a war of attrition. With our better resources, we could last longer, but the truth was, that kind of war was boring.

Then came the ceasefire. Morale was low, but we had just begun to make a dent. Why were we granting our rivals the space to pull back? Why not just deliver the killing blow? In an alliance of more than 2000 pilots, you don't question the word from on high. We should have, though. As soon as the ceasefire ended, the enemy was back, and now they hit harder than ever. One by one our systems fell, until finally we lost control of the pipe. Backed into a corner, our leader took the only option that made sense to him: If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

But it didn't make sense to the guys in my corporation (there's also a woman, actually) or to those in a number of other corps. One by one, we began pulling out, leaving the friends we had flown with, mined with, lived and died with for months on end. It was a surprisingly emotional experience. Though most of us had never met outside the game, many of us had become friends nonetheless. But now that old enemies were new allies, it looked like some old allies would have to face the wrong end of our guns.

In the end, our old alliance, which we had come to love, just fell apart, forsaken by the pilots who had been its military backbone and the industrialists who had kept them in ships. We moved on. And, though we haven't found a home that's become as important to us as our old stomping grounds were, it isn't a sad story at all. Because it's our story, our common history. It belongs to the dozens of guys in my corp and the hundreds in our old alliance. No one else will ever live through it, because it wasn't written into the script by a game developer or generated on the fly by any AI. We wrote it. That's why we play *EVE*.

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Hey, Vinci! Code this! [below] Just like its biological counterpart, the Vinci King Leviathan spider can burrow underground and reappear anywhere using massive steel corkscrew drill-bits.

Veni, Vidi, Vinci

Rise of Nations: Rise of Legends is an unusual taste worth acquiring BY KELLY WAND

★ ★ ★ ★

Genre Tripindicular RTS **Developer** Big Huge Games
Publisher Microsoft **ESRB** Teen **Requirements** 1.4GHz CPU; 256MB RAM

The risibly named *Rise of Nations: Rise of Legends* is an admittedly acquired but piquant taste, a weirdly absorbing trinket whose true dazzle reveals itself only gradually to the patient eye. Those who burn out on it prematurely in a rush to see all the units will feel disappointed, especially considering the slim pickings on the single-player end. So will those who are expecting from the screen shots something more properly epic, along the lines of *Battle for Middle-Earth II* set in a *Myst*-like universe.

Not that it's a bad-looking game. It's just less about awe than flavor, compared with its elephantine antecedent *Rise of Nations*. That game somehow succeeded in compressing a sprawling, turn-based marathon monstrosity like *Civilization* into an accessible, bite-sized real-time strategy format with a smoothness and elegance that *Age of Empire Earths* can only dream of. By contrast, *Legends* is a relatively straightforward game that owes more to *StarCraft*. It involves a triad of unique races and the clash of science versus magic, with spiky groves of light blue minerals as your principal resource.

The different races have similar unit types (melee, range, siege, air, hero) and a painfully bread-and-butter single-player campaign whose stiffness dilutes much of their mystique. All the same, they manage to feel intriguing, distinctive, and like parts of a compelling, if not quite coherent, whole. (Have the Alin and Vinci always coexisted? Are they at war? Is Giacomo straight? Who knows? Who cares?)

The Vinci, with their rickety steampunk architecture and armies of mechanical spiders and clockwork men that look slapped together from 1970s erector sets, are excellent midgame turtlers. Being human and all, they serve as an ideal race to start with. Their whirring gears and smoke-belching ducts suggest an alternate reality where Da Vinci happened to be born in Edison's time and frequented an opium den or two in the company of Jules Verne.

The Alin are vaguely Zerg-like Arabic desert wizard types who churn out hordes of cheap, disposable sand-based infantry, air units of fire, and massive, lumbering siege weapons chiseled of dark glass. Finally, as the weird, high-tech mystic race that no RTS would look fully clothed without, there's the Cuotl, a glossy, sparkly assortment of stone Mayan jaguars and floating sentinel spheres of various sizes, inscribed with Egyptian hieroglyphics and shooting death lasers straight out of *Chariots of the Gods*. The clashing zones of colored borders, precisely spaced neutral sites, and cream-colored tilesets all evoke the original *Rise of Nations*, but the alien landscapes range from volcanic chasms to poisonous green deserts to forbidding jungles festooned with eerie stone temples. It's not lavish and poetic and spectacular like *Battle for Middle-Earth II*, but silly and strangely lovely in a *Flash Gordon* way.

Come for the looks, stay for the gameplay. For all the challenge of mastering three races and the layers within onionskin layers of tactical nuance, *Rise of Legends* is actually much easier to jump into than *Rise of Nations*, even for those who didn't. Instead of six resources to worry about, there are only two, timonium and wealth/energy. Unlike in *Rise of Nations*, you don't have to waste time trying to find the most productive sites for your mines, mills, and quarries. There are no Wonders of the World or naval units (or water, for that matter) or screwball victory conditions. *Rise of Legends* is all about plunging you into battle as soon—and often—as possible, steadily expanding your borders and pushing your troops all the way to your opponent's capital, upgrading units and leveling your heroes en route.

Although the Vinci tech tree involves making research labs that convert into other stuff like telescopes, calculators, and doom cannons, the civic maintenance is simpler than in *Rise of Nations*. A lot of it boils down to expanding your cities with the occasional city district on the fly. Military districts enhance your population cap and provide city defense, merchant districts boost your economy, industrial/holy/magus districts grant research points and tech boosts, and palace districts upgrade your city size.

There are also the special abilities of your

heroes, super-units like a glass dragon and a giant spider that shoots rockets from its cephalothorax, and four god powers called "dominances" that can be acquired by any player and change hands as fortunes shift. So there's always something going on, and always a new fistful of tricky decisions to mull over. Defensive structures can only be constructed within your borders, for instance, and each one you invest in costs steadily more, making placement critical. There are even some peculiar synergies you probably never noticed before, like the fact that Cuotl Holy Arks attached to mines boost their energy output, or that their barracks/fanes are also flying transports.

The more you study the races, the more they seem lovingly tailored for one of the three trademark RTS play-styles. Outré appearances notwithstanding, the Cuotl are perhaps the easiest to master, with shielded buildings and a free fane (barracks) to start, but they need to tech hard before switching to offense. Meanwhile, the Alin start out with hordes of cheap, fragile units and the enticement of instant air for an early rush, but they're hard-pressed to recoup when things go sour. The Vinci build units the fastest and have the biggest array of options, but they can pursue only one of three mutually exclusive tech tracks at their prototype factory.

It all sounds wildly complicated, but somehow the breezy interface and well-organized tool tips manage to keep you from feeling buried in data. In fact, unlocking the data is more interesting than the battles themselves.

In some areas, there's a bit less to *Legends* than you might hope. The sound is especially disappointing. Not only is the volume erratic, being curiously muted and sometimes altogether disappearing during what resemble cataclysmic explosions, but the sound choices themselves are drearily conventional for such exotic graphics. Shouldn't the Vinci buildings and units sound clankier and more ratcheting and Victorian?

A worse problem is the glaring omission of an organic, turn-based Conquer the World mode like the one found in *Rise of Nations*. There's a deceptively similar-looking map, but it's used solely as rigging for the scripted, linear single-player campaign of puzzle missions, which there's little incentive to plod through more than once, if that. (Playing against AI only teaches bad habits in the end, anyway.)

Technically, each race gets its "own" campaign, but you're made to play these out sequentially. The way the story's rigged, you're usually fighting against the same race that you're playing in all three scenarios. (Open letter to game designers: Civil wars are less dramatic than ones between different species; that's why they call it money.) It doesn't help that you're stuck playing the ineffectual Vinci inventor hero Giacomo throughout, a protagonist so milquetoast that not even the women composing his G-rated love triangle seem to notice his transformation into a grim glass cyborg. (And why don't he or any other Vinci characters have Italian accents, when the Alin speak in Arabic-inflected English, and the Cuotl thrum?)

The real deal-breaker, at press time, is connectivity problems that continue to afflict online play even after two patches. Some games simply don't launch. Packet loss and the occasional disconnect remain a problem and undo the charms of what's actually an accessible, pleasantly designed matchmaking browser.

Following up a grand slam nuclear blast like *Nations* with a bottle rocket may seem like an odd choice. But in many ways, the smaller fiddle plays the sweeter music. *Nations* was brilliant and compulsively playable but also a bit daunting; sessions could easily degenerate into endless deadlocks of epic tedium or fizzle with a cheap Wonder victory. Now that it's retooled three real cultures into science fictional superrace versions of themselves with style and grace, it's time for Big Huge Games to get cracking on the other 21. ■

Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter

Everyone say it together: GRAW!

★ ★ ★ ★ ½

Genre Intense Slowpoke Shooter
Developer GRIN **Publisher** Ubisoft
ESRB Teen **Requirements** 2GHz CPU; 1GB RAM

The acronym for *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter* sounds incredibly macho, like something you'd scream to get fired up before heading out to anonymous foreign lands and meeting, liberating, and/or killing brown people. "Okay men, together now: *GRAW!*" It's the perfect acronym for the kind of full-throttle tactical action found throughout Ubisoft's latest Tom Clancy-branded game.

That the PC version appeared after the well-reviewed Xbox 360 one was cause for alarm. The original *Ghost Recon* was an excellent, if relatively bare-bones, PC tactical shooter, but the console *Advanced Warfighter* was something else: a hybrid tactical/action game with a goofy HUD and lots of amazing visual effects. (The less said about the console-only *Ghost Recon 2*, the better.) Where the 360 version is all smack-you-in-the-face action, the PC version slows down the pace while maintaining the kinetics. It also retains the candy-colored HUD—which turns out to be incredibly useful—and developer GRIN has crafted an entirely different single-player game set in the same Mexican city as the 360 version.

As with the original *Ghost Recon*, individual missions are more like puzzles than dynamic tactical scenarios. Though the urban environments provide multiple ways to get from Point A to Point B to fulfill your objectives, your course is always directed to certain scripted areas where you're guaranteed some action. You run through these a few times, die at key moments, and then try to figure out how to handle each one using actual tactics. This process leads to a lot of dying, reloading, trying something else, dying, and reloading. In fact, it's brutally difficult until you realize you can't just Rambo your way through levels. You need to creep from corner to corner and issue intelligent orders to your fellow Ghosts. The urban environments in *GRAW* make it much less run-and-gun–oriented than the original *Ghost Recon*.

The single-player missions can be played either solo or in multiplayer co-op mode. While co-op is always a welcome addition, its implementation in *GRAW* is a mix of awesomeness and frustration. Each mission is extremely long, and humans don't respawn. If one player dies early, they get to watch. And if the leader gets taken down, it's game over. On the plus side, it's a lot more of a challenge for serious players than *Ghost Recon* ever was; that game basically let you charge a base, and you needed little in the way of coordination to actually succeed. If you split up in *GRAW* or don't follow some proper strategies (laying down cover fire, flanking, etc.), you have no chance.

But if *Ghost Recon* was only interesting as a multiplayer game, *GRAW* gets the single-player right. The AI isn't quite *SWAT 4* or *Full Spectrum Warrior* level, but it's close. Your fellow Ghosts generally follow orders and only occasionally do something stupid. The interface is similar to the one in *SWAT 4*, where you point to a location, pull up a menu, scroll through the options, and send everyone on their way. The world's most detailed overhead satellite map can also be used to issue orders, which is a nice way to give generic ones. But it's a lot quicker to just point and shoot.

And that, in a nutshell, is the appeal of games like *GRAW*. All it does is present some interesting tactical action, a lot of graphically impressive—if somewhat too amber-colored—carnage, and a lot of intense pointing and shooting. And that's more than enough. **–Steve Bauman**

[left] Blame Ridley Scott for every wargame looking very amber. [below] Your fellow Ghosts aren't looking very ghostly.

TOP SELLERS

APRIL 2006

1. **Sims 2: Open for Business** Electronic Arts ★★★★
2. **Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion** Bethesda ★★★★★
3. **Sims 2: Family Fun Stuff** Electronic Arts Not Rated
4. **World of WarCraft** Blizzard Entertainment ★★★★★
5. **Guild Wars: Factions** NCSoft Not Rated
6. **Star Wars Empire at War** LucasArts ★★★★½
7. **The Sims 2** Electronic Arts ★★★★★
8. **Battle for Middle-earth II** Electronic Arts ★★★★½
9. **Age of Empires III** Microsoft ★★★
10. **Civilization IV** 2K Games ★★★★★

MAY 2006

1. **Guild Wars Factions** NCsoft Not Rated
2. **Sims 2: Family Fun Stuff** Electronic Arts Not Rated
3. **World of WarCraft** Blizzard Entertainment ★★★★★
4. **Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion** Bethesda ★★★★★
5. **Sims 2 Open For Business** Electronic Arts ★★★★
6. **The Sims 2** Electronic Arts ★★★★★
7. **Rise of Nations: Rise of Legends** Microsoft ★★★★
8. **Star Wars: Empire At War** LucasArts ★★★★½
9. **Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter** Ubisoft ★★★★½
10. **Battlefield 2** Electronic Arts ★★★★½

Source: NPD Group/NPD Funworld. The April and May lists are based on units sold by more than 70 channel partners, representing 90% of the U.S. retail consumer market.

The Mute Menace

The ever-talkative Gordon Freeman must escape from City 17 in the predictably unpredictable **Half-Life 2: Episode One** BY STEVE BAUMAN

★ ★ ★

Genre Flight Adventure Developer/Publisher Valve Software
Requirements 1.2GHz CPU, 256MB RAM ESRB Mature

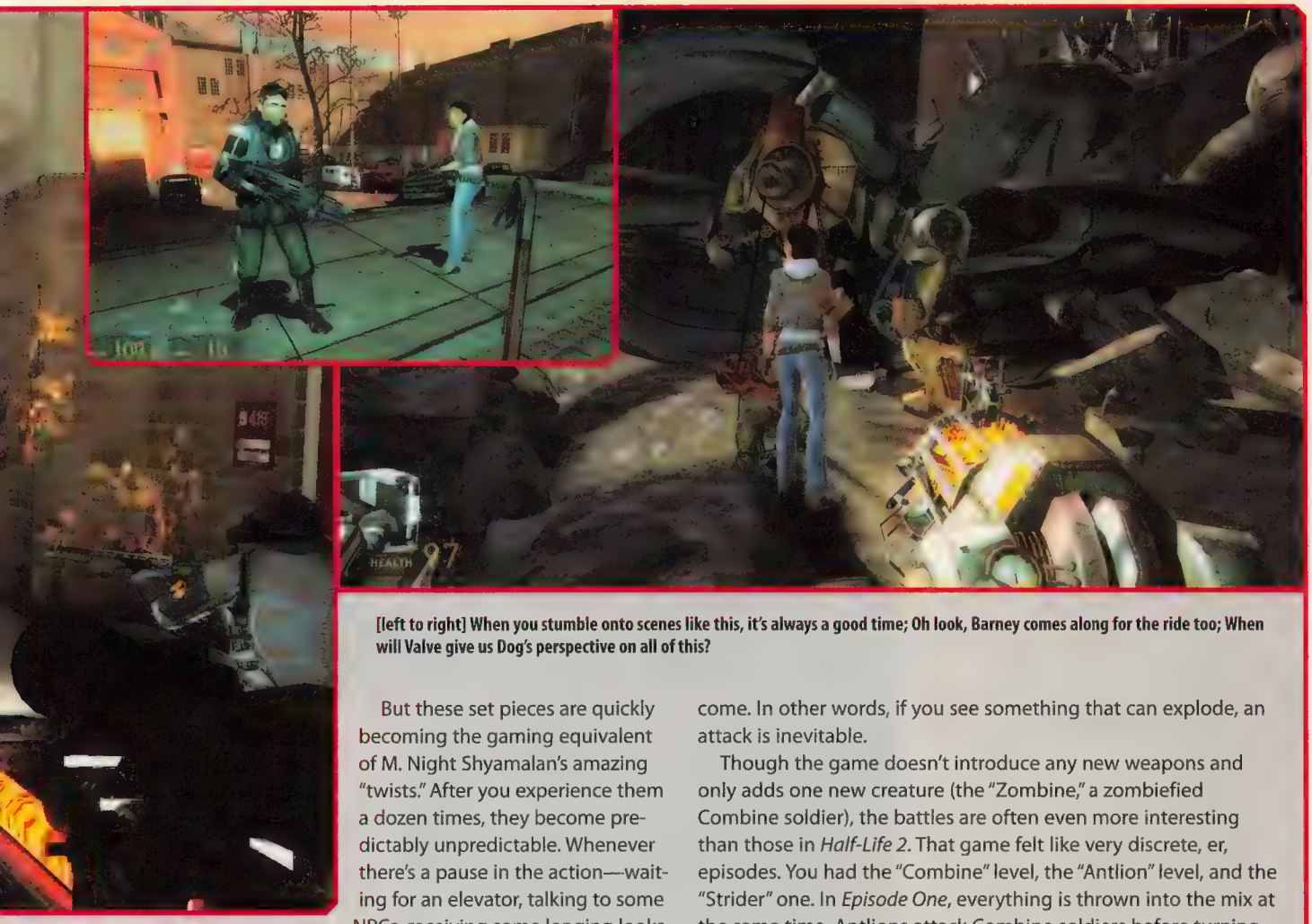
The idea of episodic content is interesting, in theory. For less cash than a full-blown expansion or full game would cost, you get a self-contained, bite-sized adventure with all the bells and whistles you expect of a full-blown product. After blasting through it in a fraction of the time it takes to slog your way through a full game, you can move on to something lengthier and more satisfying, and the developer can take solace in the fact that it can still charge you a fair amount of cash for its lesser works. Everyone wins. Maybe.

The problem with Valve's first attempt at this kind of entertainment, *Half-Life 2: Episode One*, is that it's competing with the legacy of its previous two games, *Half-Life 2* and *Half-Life*. Those games took nearly a decade to produce, so it's not like Valve pumps out a new game with any regularity. Each of its products has been an event, in large part because of the gaps between releases. *Episode One* doesn't feel like the next saga in the continuing epic adventure of gaming's supreme wordsmith, Gordon Freeman; it feels like table scraps instead of a course in a full gaming meal.

For all the praise it's garnered, the story told in the *Half-Life* series has always been less interesting than how it's delivered. *Episode One* still puts you in the shoes of the silent but deadly Freeman, and it still tells its story without the benefit of cutscenes—you experience instead of watching it. But *Episode One* ups the vagueness to a point where you wonder if Valve even knows what's going on. It opens with Gordon Freeman and Alyx Vance surviving Freeman's game of *Star Castle* that served as the ending of *Half-Life 2*. This involves an impossibly cheesy *deus ex machina* featuring aliens, the G-Man, and some flashing lights.

> **"Episode One ups the vagueness to a point where you wonder if Valve even knows what's going on."**

The main goal of *Episode One* is to escape from the Citadel and the city with Alyx. You move from elaborate set piece to elaborate set piece—Valve can probably do these things in its sleep—and, despite feeling almost tossed off, those sequences are still more exciting and better paced than almost anything seen in a game in the 18 months since *Half-Life 2* was released. Valve doesn't overplay its hand, limiting the appearances of its Striders and Antlions. Even everyone's favorite enemy, the Head Crab, is used sparingly.



[left to right] When you stumble onto scenes like this, it's always a good time; Oh look, Barney comes along for the ride too; When will Valve give us Dog's perspective on all of this?

But these set pieces are quickly becoming the gaming equivalent of M. Night Shyamalan's amazing "twists." After you experience them a dozen times, they become predictably unpredictable. Whenever there's a pause in the action—waiting for an elevator, talking to some NPCs, receiving some longing looks and melodramatically foreboding dialogue from Alyx—you know something big is about to happen. The surprises are no longer a surprise; they're a contrivance. (And as the game goes on, their accompanying music moves from subtle and moody to overbearing. We get it: Something exciting is going on.)

With so many games moving toward giving players open-ended worlds with all sorts of emergent AI behavior, *Episode One* remains almost oppressively linear and heavily scripted. While this kind of tightly controlled experience allows for some spectacular moments—again, Valve does this kind of thing better than anyone else—everyone gets the exact same moments, presented in the exact same way. You can't share stories about your in-game adventures, because everyone's are identical. The AI compensates to a degree, allowing some of the battles to play out in spectacular fashion. But even then, most of the "wow" moments are canned: The soldiers always rappel down the sides of buildings or blast through doors at the exact same time, in the exact same way.

You start with the Gravity Gun as your sole weapon—it was all you had at the end of *Half-Life 2*. While it allows for more variety as far as dispatching the enemies, playing "What can I throw at a Combine soldier next?" eventually gets dull and repetitive. Sure, blowing up canisters to take guys out is cool when it's improvised, but in almost every case here it telegraphs what's about to come. In other words, if you see something that can explode, an attack is inevitable.

Though the game doesn't introduce any new weapons and only adds one new creature (the "Zombine," a zombiefied Combine soldier), the battles are often even more interesting than those in *Half-Life 2*. That game felt like very discrete, er, episodes. You had the "Combine" level, the "Antlion" level, and the "Strider" one. In *Episode One*, everything is thrown into the mix at the same time. Antlions attack Combine soldiers before turning their attention to you, and Head Crabs try to mate with everyone's noggin.

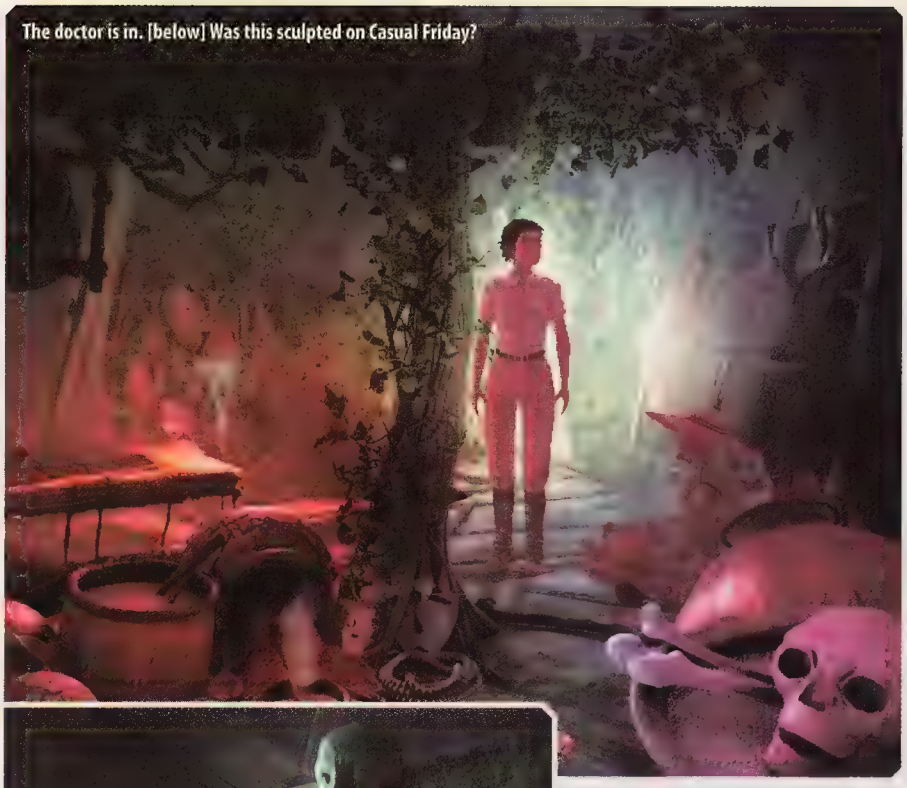
Fortunately, you're never alone this time out. Alyx is always by your side, and she remains the only recognizable human being in *Half-Life*: Gordon is a cipher, Barney is a typically goofy videogame character, and everyone else is a nonentity. Even though Alyx invades Gordon's personal space with alarming frequency, literally pushing him around the apparently glass streets and floors of City 17, there's a gentle intimacy in their (one-way) interactions. She's also a crack shot, and Valve forces the two of you to work together in most scenes. In the early part of the game, she's the one with the gun, and in later dark areas, she relies on you shining your flashlight at the incoming enemies. It's a remarkably subtle and rich characterization, which is rare in today's games.

After a tedious escort mission—when aren't escort missions tedious?—and a terrific set piece involving a Strider, *Episode One* just sort of ends. No questions are answered, and nothing is resolved. There's a cliffhanger and a trailer that says, "Buy *Episode Two*." So, as a sequence of action scenes, *Episode One* mostly delivers the goods, albeit in a rather predictable manner. But it lacks the epic scope of both *Half-Life* games. It feels like exactly what it is: a small and perhaps insignificant part of something much larger and (hopefully) more interesting. ■

Paradise
Lost

★ ½

Genre Penance **Developer** White Birds Productions
Publisher Ubisoft **ESRB** Teen
Requirements 1.5GHz CPU; 512MB RAM



The doctor is in. [below] Was this sculpted on Casual Friday?

Hidden away on the African continent, Maurania is a nation shielded by impassable natural boundaries. It's a place where the modern era and yesteryear collide in a bizarre blend of technology and tribal lore. It's a haven for strains of wildlife both fantastic and terrifying. It's a country slowly being devoured by civil war. In short, it's the perfect setting for an adventure game. It's also one that Benoit Sokal's *Paradise* squanders through poor writing, dubious design, and sloppy execution.

All hopes of a high-quality story evaporate with a single word: amnesia. The game opens in the palace of a Mauranian prince, where a mysterious foreigner is afflicted with said memory loss. The locals dub her Ann Smith—a name as generic as the plot—and inform her that she is under a sort of benevolent house arrest until she recovers. So begins Ann's quest to regain her freedom, identity, and motivation. It soon becomes clear that her fate is somehow entwined with the Prince's pet, a black leopard that joins Ann on her journey across Maurania. During their trek, *Paradise* unfolds the familiar tale of "girl meets leopard, girl loses leopard, girl gets leopard, girl loses leopard again, girl gets leopard, girl loses leopard AGAIN." Along the way, they meet demented miners, wacky tree people, and violent revolutionaries, all of whom sound as exotic as the diners at your local Denny's. This would-be saga culminates in an anticlimactic ending that raises more questions than it answers, like "That's it?" and "Why did I play this?"

While a lackluster narrative can be deadly to an adventure game, it's not fatal when coupled with compelling gameplay. But *Paradise* fails on this count too, thanks to its ridiculous and tiresome puzzles. Ludicrous tasks have always been a regrettable staple of the genre. But how seriously can you take a game where the solution to being held against your will is to outwit a mechanized pantry for sweet rolls? Worse, these tasks must often be completed in a counterintuitive order, and you're required to repeat the most tedious ones several times. There are also numerous logic gaps, such as only being able to fill a water jar from one particular side of one particular pool in an environment overflowing with the blue stuff. Feedback is problematic, too; on occasion, you'll lose or gain an important item with no indication of what's happened beyond a vague animation and some cryptic phrase like "How am I going to get that back?" The illusion of reality that is created by the game's striking visuals is shattered by design decisions like these.

The game's most difficult challenge, though, is its wretched interface. *Paradise*'s context-sensitive cursor has such finicky tracking that each location becomes a mind-numbing, millimeter-by-millimeter pixel hunt as you wait for the cursor to identify hotspots correctly. The optional minigame, in which you navigate the leopard through a series of obstacles, uses a cumbersome pointer system that frequently snags the leopard on the scenery. The inventory interface is equally maddening, as it regularly gets stuck in view mode, making it impossible for you to select and use any of your items. Frenzied pounding on the mouse buttons seems to be the only fix.

Such gaffes are indicative of the slipshod feel of *Paradise*. Dialogue trees show threads that have been made irrelevant. Some inventory items still have placeholder names like "Object-ao2515co4-Plant2." Graphic glitches cause characters to slide instead of walking across the floor. The sound mix can obscure crucial dialogue with music or environmental effects. The Cinematic Viewer simply doesn't work. The game isn't broken, per se, but to call it unpolished is a colossal understatement.

Given the charm, elegance, and imagination of designer Benoit Sokal's best-known work, *Syberia*, it is a crushing disappointment that these qualities are almost entirely absent from *Paradise*. It should be interesting to look back in a few years' time and see whether *Paradise* was just a victim of Sokal's growing pains or the first stumble in his fall from grace. **–Justin Fletcher**

SiN Episodes 1: Emergence

Big guns and big breasts don't compensate for clichés and dated gameplay

★ ★ ½

Genre Short Shooter
Developer/Publisher Ritual Entertainment
ESRB Mature **Requirements** 1.2GHz CPU; 256MB RAM

If you were taking bets last year on which shooter franchise was least likely to be resurrected in 2006, chances are a lot of people would have put money on Ritual Entertainment's *SiN*. This *Duke Nukem* wannabe may have hit the market in 1998 with a splooge of hype, but it was a mess of simplicity, clichés, and bugs. You wouldn't think that it would be a good candidate for a resurrection eight years after being killed in the cradle.

Yet *SiN Episodes 1: Emergence* is not only here, it's the first poster child for a marketing experiment that involves selling bite-sized (meaning four hours of gameplay and no multiplayer) shooters for $20 in stores and over Steam. The results are decidedly mixed, as the *SiN* setting is still weighed down by banal action-hero motifs and tired level design—sewers! crates!—that seem like relics of the late 1990s.

Like the original *SiN*, one thing that *Emergence* does well is capture a B-movie feel, courtesy of Rambo-with-dreadlocks protagonist John R. Blade, spunky sidekick Jessica Cannon's exposed thong straps (again, hello

[top]While SinTek commandos may be quick on the draw, they shoot like stormtroopers. [above] Jessica's no fan of even the holographic version of Elexis.

late '90s), and cheesy arch-villainess Elexis Sinclair, who has never met a push-up bra she didn't like. There's no sense of humor, though. Blade rarely talks, let alone dishes out quips lampooning this Snidely Whiplash with porn-star breasts who's about to unleash a genetic plague on the futuristic city of Freeport.

If you haven't played the first game—it's included here but isn't any better than it was in 1998, so good luck getting through it—you won't be able to make sense of all the talk about SinTek, mutants, Freeport corruption, and Elexis' hatred of Blade. Not that the plot gets in the way of the old-fashioned action. The first two thirds of the game are set in an industrial complex and sewer, and the conclusion takes place in a lab and office tower. Everything plays out pretty much Point A-to-Point B, although you run into the occasional "How do I get there from here?" puzzle that needs to be solved with creative jumping or messing around with a crane.

A lot of the furniture is destructible, but blowing stuff up isn't a lot of fun, because you're stuck with the default pistol and a shotgun throughout the game. (One notable exception is a brief affair with a machine gun in the closing levels.) And even though rooms and hallways look nice, thanks to Valve's Source engine, they are mostly bare. A few areas are decorated with nothing but crates. You get the feeling that the Ritual guys are either still designing like it's 1999 or making a joke, although if it's the latter, it's one without a punchline.

The enemies are just as bland. There are just a few types of foe in *Emergence*, including stock terrorist-looking guys with balaclavas, stock terrorist-looking guys with jetpacks, armored soldiers with chain guns, and two types of mutant. You spend 99 percent of the time blowing away dumb balaclava dudes (who don't take cover, ignore dead comrades at their feet, etc.), so it's a blessing that the game ends at the four-hour mark. Also, the game is easy at the default difficulty setting because of the AI deficiencies and a "Give Assistance" feature that drops the challenge when you reload a lot. This kicked in just once, however, replacing a pair of chain-gun soldiers with shotgun-wielding grunts when we got stuck after quicksaving with just 11 health.

Movement is another issue. The fantastic physics of the Source engine are out of whack here. Blade glides like Sasha Cohen even with mouse sensitivity dialled all the way down, presumably to mimic the slip-sliding-away quickness of traditional shooters. Thank God there aren't any jumping puzzles, because it's awfully easy to slide off ledges. Other physics effects are cranked up as well. Shoot a computer monitor or blow up an explosive barrel, and everything ricochets around like Mexican jumping beans.

Even with the negatives described here, *SiN Episodes 1: Emergence* is a hard game to critique because it isn't complete. A lot of good shooters have spent a few hours in sewers and gotten bogged down for a couple of levels with dumb, repetitive enemies. Still, Ritual is going to have to do a better job with Episode 2 if it wants fans to keep tuning in and spending $20 a pop to gape at Elexis Sinclair's cleavage. **–Brett Todd**

Hard to Hate

The messy **Heroes of Might and Magic V** is hard to love, but harder to hate BY BENJAMIN E. SONES

★ ★ ★

Genre Strategic Quest **Developer** Nival Interactive
Publisher Ubisoft **ESRB** Teen **Requirements** 1.5GHz CPU; 512MB RAM

When New World Computing closed its doors in 2003, fans of its long-running series *Heroes of Might and Magic* thought it was game over. Ubisoft scooped up the rights to the franchise and passed the development torch to *Etherlords* creator Nival Interactive. That left fans of the series with one burning question: Can the Russian developer recapture the magic and make a game that lives up to the *Heroes* legacy?

Definitely. Sort of.

Perhaps the best thing about *Heroes of Might and Magic V* is that it doesn't take too many liberties with the familiar recipe. In spite of the attractive new 3D graphics and the brilliantly revamped tactical combat system, it plays a lot like a game that New World might have made. In fact, Nival has gone back to basics in many respects, stripping the game of a lot of the dead-weight mechanics that the series has accumulated over the years. Gone is the ability to move your heroes around the battlefield, or to make stacks with multiple heroes, or with nothing but heroes, or with no heroes. *Heroes of Might and Magic V* returns to the simple dynamic of one hero, one stack, and the game is better for it. As in the early entries in the series, heroes serve primarily as a throttle on your ability to expand. In order to move a stack of monsters around the map, you have to hire a hero to lead them. But heroes are expensive, and that limits how quickly you can expand your influence. It was—and still is—a good system, and Nival clearly understands why.

But if Nival really "gets" the appeal of the franchise in some respects, it misses the target completely in others. The meat of the *Heroes* games has always been the stand-alone scenarios. Heck, the original game in the series didn't even have a campaign, and even *Heroes IV*, which was a bit light in terms of stand-alone content, came with 31 individual scenarios plus a map editor. *Heroes V* comes with 10. And no editor.

Sure, there are six "single scenarios" that play a lot like campaign missions. They have the same over-long cutscenes with the same painfully bad dialogue, nonadjustable settings, and puzzle-like objectives. They aren't particularly replayable. Then there is the campaign itself, a six-chapter, 30-scenario monster that only takes slightly more time to complete than a doctoral dissertation. Like other campaigns in the series, it serves as a sort of tutorial, easing you into the various game mechanics by introducing them to you a few at a time. It also breaks [use stronger word? Disrupts?] some of the dynamics of the game—particularly the hero dynamic that Nival so expertly resurrected. You generally don't want to waste

money and experience on extra heroes in the campaign, because only the story-centric heroes (and their hard-earned skills) carry over to the next scenario.

By the end, you'll be comfortable with all the nuances of each faction… and you'll have all but run out of content. In previous *Heroes* games, the campaigns were always just an appetizer for the endlessly replayable goodness to follow. In *Heroes V*, the campaign is pretty much the whole game. It may seem odd to complain about a lack of content in a game that features well over 100 hours of just that, but there you have it. A hundred salads are not a dinner.

Still, *Heroes V* is a hard game to hate. It hits too many notes too perfectly to be easily dismissed. The tactical combat, for instance, is fantastic—it's easily the best in the series. The new battlefield puts more emphasis on effective unit placement, both before and during combat. Large units, which take up four squares, are now trickier to maneuver, but they're even more essential for screening your back-line missile units. The tight quarters of the new battlefields, along with larger creatures and obstacles, make movement skills like teleportation and flight more valuable. (Previously those skills were only useful in sieges.) The new initiative bar makes it a lot easier to see the effects of morale and to understand exactly which units will move in what order so that you can plan your attacks accordingly. Heroes and war machines tilt the odds as off-

[clockwise from above left] The tactical combat is easily the best in the series to date; The creature designs and animations are all top-notch; You have to rotate the camera a lot in town view to see what you've built, and many of the buildings are so nondescript that it's difficult to remember what they are.

battlefield support units without unbalancing things. There are myriad different strategies that you can pursue through creature recruitment and skill development, and the unit art and combat animations are wonderful. How could there be any sour notes in a game with combat this good?

Yet there are. The new ghost mode in multiplayer feels tacked on and does little to address downtime issues. There aren't many multiplayer maps to play, in any event. The 3D interface is inconsistent (why does the mouse scroll the view in the world map but not in combat?) and sometimes clunky (you have to rotate the camera constantly to see anything in dungeons), and the 3D town view is functionally useless. This flaw defeats the purpose of the town view as a means of assessing your upgrades at a glance: They might as well not have it at all.

Speaking of not having things at all, no definitive creature list or spell list or building list is available anywhere in the game. The game interface only gives you stats for creatures that you can currently recruit, and the manual contains no specific information about creatures, spells, or buildings. There is no in-game database, no reference card—nothing. You can't even right-click to check creature abilities when you encounter them on the world map; that only works during combat. Can't remember whether Gremlins have a missile attack? You'll just have to charge into battle and find out. (Word to the wise: They do.)

While *Heroes V* may be a hard game to hate, it's also a hard game to love. It has the makings of a great game, and a good expansion pack or two could get it there. Here's hoping that Ubisoft and Nival stick with it. ■

Spellforce 2: Shadow Wars

When bad games go good

★ ★ ★ ½

Genre Between an RPG and RTS
Developer Phenomic **Publisher** Aspyr **ESRB** Mature
Requirements 1.6Ghz CPU; 512MB RAM

[top] Stop "dragon" my genre around! [left] The bad Euro-RTS part of Spellforce 2. [above] This man was voted "Worst-Dressed Fighter Ever."

Like its predecessor, *Spellforce 2* is a bad game. It gets so many things wrong. As a real-time strategy game, it's superficial. You quickly bump into your unit limit, at which point you're pretty much done with anything resembling an economy. Each side has a few races you can choose from, so you make a grab bag of units and let the tactical AI do its thing during battles. Your army's doings aren't really any of your business. As in an MMO, you're just mousing around the outside of the screen to press a few icons for your heroes' special abilities, tabbing among enemies you can't even see in all the mess, waiting on spells to recharge. In the middle of the screen, you might mistake the kaleidoscope of colorful shapes and effects for bad 2D, but you can twirl the camera to see that it's actually 3D. Not that there's any reason to.

Spellforce 2 fares slightly better as a role-playing game. Still, there's nothing that stands out from the typical generic fantasy pap: Dwarves, Shadow Elves, Dragons, Trolls,—none of them looking like anything other than what you'd expect. In lieu of loot, *Spellforce 2* is choked with inconsequential inventory items. The character development is stingy and plodding. The story is driven by terrible writing and voice acting so bad that you have to hear it to believe it. There's a fair bit of down-time that involves walking around or waiting for your party to catch up with you.

The whole thing has the feel of a budget *Baldur's Gate* with a bad European RTS tacked on. When it gets RTS-y, you'll have a shuffling, busy entourage following you around. These bits are more about guiding a wave of units than anything involving actual tactics. The interface could have been less stingy with the hot keys and accessible information.

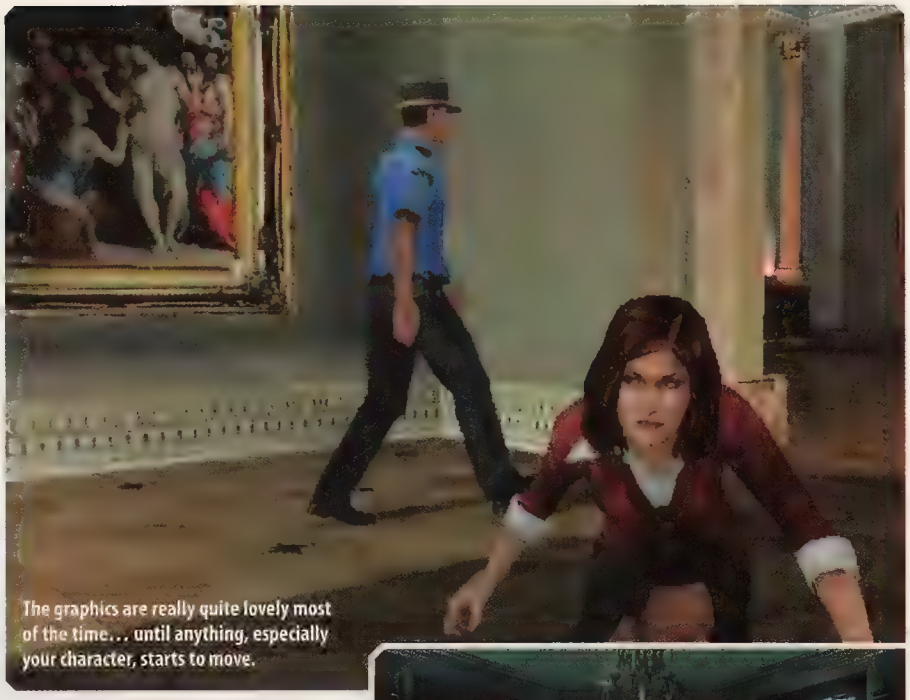
But, again like its predecessor, *Spellforce 2* somehow rises above its own mediocrity. Instead of being a good game, it's something arguably better: an effective one. You know the distinction. It's like watching a really bad movie and grinning anyway, getting into a dopey pop song, or being hooked on some schmaltzy, manipulative TV show.

So it is with *Spellforce 2*. It's slow to happen, but it happens. There's really nothing like the way it alternates between aping *Diablo*, *Baldur's Gate*, and *WarCraft*, so it has a strangely compelling pace, bopping from one genre homage to the next. You'll be pulled forward, wanting to see what the next map is like. You'll be curious about how the next race plays. You may even want to see how a quest resolves. Despite the terrible writing, some clever quests manage to buck the FedEx trend. For instance, at one point, to sober up a drunken Dwarf, you're charged to look around the map for a bunch of different herbs. Great. They could be anywhere, and these maps are big with a lot of tedious travel time. But wait! If you'd rather, you can do an alternative quest that involves going to a waypoint and simply killing stuff. It's like the developers read your mind. There's a lot of creativity in the way they send you scurrying to and fro

among these contrived maze maps, and even back to previous maps.

The engine looks pretty bad in action, substituting busyness for spectacle. But when it's quiet, as you're traipsing around the countrysides and dungeons—and you do a lot of traipsing—it's lovely enough that you may actually use the over-the-shoulder camera view. The campaign is long and engaging, which are two complementary qualities too often kept separate in RPGs.

As a multiplayer game, there's simply not much here. Too much "gotcha!" map design ruins the freestyle mode, which lets you level up a persistent character across different maps, almost like modules in *Neverwinter Nights*. But these are little more than canned missions built to hit you hard and often, with your hero just a bystander most of the time. So much for a multiplayer RPG. And, if you're looking here for a viable RTS, you're in the wrong place. This is a game that works only because it manages to carve out its own place between two genres, neither of which it does very well. But, in the "'tween" space it's created, *Spellforce 2* is much better than the bad game it would otherwise be. **–Tom Chick**



The graphics are really quite lovely most of the time… until anything, especially your character, starts to move.

The Da Vinci Code

Grailroad Typhoon

★ ★

Genre CGMagdalene Adventure **ESRB** Teen
Developer The Collective **Publisher** 2K Games
Requirements 1.6GHz CPU; 512MB RAM

When it comes to finding someone to whip up a quick game from the still-warm juices of an already high-profile property, The Collective is one of the go-to developers. Take *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which translated pretty well, or *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, or *Indiana Jones*, or *Star Wars: Episode III*. In any case, whoever thought that *The Da Vinci Code* would make a good videogame was obviously… uh, well, that seems to be the point. It doesn't make a good videogame.

More an adaptation of the film than the book, the game does include a few locations found in neither, and this helps to stretch the game into about 10 hours of tedium, including sliding tile puzzles, stilted dialogue, clumsy combat, and maddening controls. Imagining Harvard symbologist Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu in combat at all is a stretch, but pair that image with *DDR*-style button-mashing (follow the bouncing lights) and you've got a disaster that'll stupefy classic adventure gamers and irritate action fans. The stealth component does allow you to avoid most combat, but it still engages you in an activity that doesn't feel quite at home in the story.

The locations are beautifully stylized, but the clunky animation soon ruins the ambience. Dan Brown's hokey but compelling story is probably better told in any other medium, not excluding Claymation, hieroglyphics, and sock puppets.

The saving grace here, in addition to the crazy, obsessive albino monk with a penchant for self-discipline, is a number of very solid puzzles. Besides the sliding things (both tiles and the ol' "slipping the cardboard under the door to catch the key on the other side" trick), there are some word puzzles that will appeal to language lovers, especially fans of cryptograms and anagrams. Some of the "usage puzzles" (item combines, assembly, etc.) even make sense. If you can overcome the icky control scheme and evil checkpoint save system, there's some tasty solving here, especially in the endgame and post-game.

This element doesn't overcome the weight of the package, though—there's just more teeth-grinding here than fun. When a title this deliciously hot is served up concurrently with a film of the same name, it serves its purpose (hint: This involves the exchange of currency). But in the end, it doesn't serve gamers, not even the extremely forgiving cadre of adventure game fans. **–Cindy Yans**

Yahtzee!

Out of the Park Baseball 2006 launches one way out of the park BY STEVE BAUMAN

★★★★½

Genre Sexy Spreadsheet **Developer** Markus Heinsohn/Andreas Raht
Publisher Sports Interactive **ESRB** Everyone
Requirements Windows/MacOs: If it boots, it'll run

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

Baseball is the go-to sport for wonks and cranks, and no game is wonkier and crankier than *Out of the Park Baseball 2006*. It presents you with a virtual orgy of data as you try to run your favorite baseball team into the ground. But if you think VORP is something you snack on while hiking instead of an acronym for "Value Over Replacement Player," this may not be the game for you. For the hardcore stats nerd, it's an embarrassment of riches, and of rich 20-year-olds who throw 95mph gas. Never have pages full of numbers been so sexy.

While previous versions in the series have been incremental upgrades, this is truly an all-new game. But, like most rewrites of complex games, it's also full of easily catalogued flaws. They range from bizarre trade AI and roster management to various bugs and memory leaks. There are still some quirks and inconsistencies in the all-new interface, which is modeled after Sports Interactive's *Championship Manager*. It resets your position on scrollable lists every time you leave that menu or change something. There are focus issues when using the scroll wheel, and some lists scroll down, while others require you to click through hundreds of pages of players and numbers. Those who run online leagues will be disappointed by its lack of documentation and the ballooning sizes of league files. The game's vibrant online community has already filled-in many of the gaps in its documentation, however.

To condemn the game for its flaws is to ignore its considerable strengths. It does a remarkable job of letting you access all the data you need, in as many ways as possible. Every statistical screen can be customized, which lets you mix scouted player attributes (both actual and potential) with real-life statistics. This system offers a better-rounded view of players, which is critical to your success as a talent evaluator.

OOTP2006 lets you simulate or play in leagues all over the world, moving your way up from the short summer Mexican or Japanese leagues through the low minors and rookie leagues to the show itself. (Or you can just disable those other leagues to speed up the simming process and get fewer trade requests.) There's an elaborate scouting system in place that gives you crap ratings for each player unless you send your scouts to other teams, leagues, or countries to find and rate the talent.

You can still manage individual games. It isn't very sophisticated, but there are some new visuals here.

And if the scout isn't so good, you're out of luck. This feature makes prospects more of a crap shoot than ever, though that's more realistic.

If anything, the new world leagues and advanced scouting are too much. If you run a full league, you're suddenly inundated with trade requests from Japanese and Mexican leagues, which may happen in baseball in 2010 but doesn't today. Scouting requires you constantly to be sending your scouts around the world and to other teams; otherwise, you have to rely on the (intentionally) terrible "SISA" scouting, which the documentation jokingly refers to as "understaffed and underfunded." In other words, you can't trust the game's ratings of players, only those of your own scouts, who, like players, are rated in various areas.

In fact, almost everything in the game has numerical ratings, and most aren't just single, blunt numbers. Many of the visible ratings are calculated from hidden ones, as when your ability at a position is tied to various fielding attributes (arm strength, ability to turn double plays) multiplied by the amount of time spent playing the position. This is a significant improvement, because it

literally allows you to put a talented player at a different position and see improvement through practice.

There's a virtual laundry list of additions, most of which greatly improve the game. A more elaborate spring training—with simulated games—adds the very real possibility of major injuries killing your season before it starts, but it also lets you identify youngsters that may be ready for the show. Negotiating contracts has received a major overhaul, letting you build in option years and bonuses for individual awards. Trades can (optionally) include draft picks, and free agents' signings of arbitration-eligible players result in additional picks going to the team that's losing the player.

Simming entire seasons takes an extremely long time, even on a fast machine, and requires a lot of patience, owing to the quantity of pop-up messages about roster issues and trades (among other things). If you want to sim without interruption, you can "go on vacation" and leave the decision making up to the AI, which, erratic as it may be, can be reined in from making any major boneheaded moves.

Complex? For sure. But to the game's considerable credit, almost all of this complexity is optional. Setting up a league is intimidating at first because of the sheer number of options. Once you figure out the game's systems, it's easy to set up something that matches your desired level of involvement. If you're a control freak, enable everything. If you just want to be Theo Epstein and take the Red Sox to the World Series, turn off some of the scouting and international leagues and focus on Major League Baseball (or at least the game's equivalent to MLB; it's not a licensed product, so it has no real teams or players). Want to recreate those terrible Yankees teams of the late-1980s or early '90s? Import a historical database and knock yourself out.

Overall, *Out of the Park Baseball 2006* is the most ambitious text-based baseball GM simulator ever, and one of the best games of the year. Considering its nearly endless replayability, it's a bargain; it may also be the last baseball game you'll ever need. ■

Out of the Park Baseball 2006 can be purchased online at ootpbaseball2006.com.

A moderately hoity-toity neighborhood where the Suits live and work.

City Life

Gotta keep 'em separated!

★ ★ ★ ★

Genre SimSimCity **Developer** Monte Cristo
Publisher CDV **ESRB** Everyone
Requirements 1.5Ghz CPU; 256MB RAM

After Impressions flooded the city builder genre with decent games, things kind of dried up. *Children of the Nile* was a recent high point as far as historical settings go, but there hasn't been a good *SimCity* clone since *SimCity 2000*.

Looking at the box, there's no reason to suspect *City Life* will change that. After all, developer Monte Cristo never met a game it wasn't willing to imitate badly. While you're installing *City Life*, take a gander at the poster-sized flow chart. It looks like something from a weekend-long seminar on management techniques. This doesn't look promising.

Fast-forward about two hours, maybe a couple of tutorials and a liberal perusal of tool tips later. It turns out this is easily the best city builder—and certainly the best contemporary city builder—since *SimCity 2000*. A powerful 3D engine lets you drop down into the city streets and admire the throngs of clones, the repeating buildings, and the awkward right angles that stick out when you build on different elevations. Still, good work on the technical front for making this possible. It's worth doing once or twice in the course of actually playing the game.

But the real accomplishment here is the design. *City Life*'s most notable bullet point is the gameplay it wrings from its distinctly European socioeconomic model. There's no Pollyanna Melting Pot philosophy here. The idea is that some people simply won't get along with one another. This is clearly from the continent that gave us the word "balkanization."

Your population is divided into classes, but they're not just progressively higher tax brackets. Instead, there's a place for everyone and everyone in his place. You need Blue Collars for an early economic foundation, but you have to cultivate the Fringe as teachers and health clinic workers. Some Fringe will evolve into the crucial Radical Chic class, which is necessary for advanced education, high-tech business, and late-game buildings like the solar furnace and fusion plant. (Consider that Silicon Valley emerged from the epicenter of hippie-dom.) Your advanced Blue Collars turn into Suits, who have lucrative finance jobs and oversee upper-level Blue Collar industries. A few Have-Nots will fall between the cracks in your social services, but you need these guys to work the landfills, coal power plants, and gardens. Eventually your city will sprout a

Other than the fact that it looks cool, there is no reason to be down here.

few Elites, who will have to be carefully pampered if you want their tax dollars.

Each type of population has its own businesses, entertainment, and predilections, which is how *City Life* is like gardening. The Blue Collars want their drive-ins and cops, the Fringe want their concert halls and health care, and the Suits need nice neighborhoods and fancy bistros staffed by Radical Chic workers. Toss the Have-Nots the odd basketball court to keep them happy. Each type of population is also liable to riot if it butts up against another type, so you end up with distinct neighborhoods. This means you need an efficient transportation network to make sure people can reach jobs, which means a careful city layout is important, which means the harder scenarios that afford less room to build can get pretty daunting.

But from population zero to three million, one citizen at a time, *City Life* is paced to provide you with tough choices, constant challenges, and, most importantly, enough information to guide you through it all. Monte Cristo has given you an interface that makes it clear why things happen. There's as much information as you could possibly want on any given aspect of your city: lists, numbers, charts, visual filters, tool tips, exhaustive (and often sloppy) text entries on gameplay concepts. You can use a report window in the lower right corner as your "to-do" list. Once you've powered through the little tutorial pamphlet, everything you need to know will be at your fingertips.

It's basically a serious in-depth version of *SimCity*. You may not get cute little text entries about how many llamas are at the local zoo, but you'll know exactly what effect your zoo has, how far the effect extends, how much money it's costing or making, how much electricity it sucks up, and how much trash it spits out.

Actually, there are no zoos in *City Life*, but if there were, those are the things you'd know. *City Life* is all about creating a provocative and challenging social model, then giving you the tools to play with it and the 3D engine to admire it. And that's pretty much what it takes to make a really good city builder. **–Tom Chick**

Rise & Fall: Civilizations at War

Stainless Steel's final rat

★ ★ ½

Genre Ancient World RTS à la Third-Person Stabber
Developer Stainless Steel Studios
Publisher Midway Games **ESRB** Teen
Requirements 1.5GHz CPU; 512MB RAM

Everyone who worked on *Rise & Fall: Civilizations at War* deserves respect for managing to get it shipped at all. It was originally conceived by Stainless Steel Studios, which shut down before finishing the game. It was eventually midwifed, via C-section, by Midway's San Diego division. Strangely (or maybe not so strangely, considering its development), it rarely showcases its handful of intriguing design ideas. It's like watching a Marx Brothers movie where most of the screen time has been handed over to Zeppo.

The learning curve is almost refreshingly shallow; you rarely have to consult the manual except to track down the occasional hotkey. The unconscionably linear 10-minute preamble required to set up your basic economy in a given session will have even those with glacial patience yawning in disbelief. Since you're forced to make both a settlement and a temple—even though you can't afford the hero it enables for quite some time—before you can make a barracks, you don't actually produce a single military unit for at least three minutes. It feels longer.

Sometimes less really is more, like having only two material resources—gold and wood—to futz with here instead of six. But, let's face it, less is usually less. The more alien to one another the factions are, the better the game. None of the four factions in *Rise & Fall*—Rome, Greece, Persia, and Egypt—feel more than cosmetically dissimilar. There's only one unit of each type to choose from, anyway, and they look much the same when you're zoomed out, which is most of the time.

So you wait and build and scrimp and wait for the eventual payoff of watching clustered inorganic specks representing Greek and Persian infantry collide and die in identical swarms, employing the same formations, tactics, and spotty pathing. Though naval battles are a selling point, you can make only one ship type, the galley, and an Egyptian galley looks like a Roman galley, distinguished by color alone. It's as if Stainless Steel's apologizing for the complexity of *Empire Earth*, but all it has really proved is that you can be simple and just as easily fail to hear the music.

The headline gimmick of *Rise & Fall* sounds promising, and it surely looked so on paper. Despite simplistic, arcade-y combat moves that RTS purists will loathe, exploring and battling through an RTS world in close-up third-person as a near-indestructible faction-specific hero like Cleopatra, Alexander, or Nebuchadnezzar gives *Rise & Fall* some much-needed flavor. Although each hero enjoys unique devastating special abilities, random button mashing achieves equally good results.

You don't even get hero command until your hero reaches level two, which involves spending "Glory" points. Glory's amassed by fighting, exploring, and building stuff in general and statues in particular, but, since none of these activities take much time and you need glory for so many things, you're often literally waiting on Glory to gloriously accumulate to a certain number. Since Glory's the only abstract resource in the game, it's strange that you wind up needing so much of it to research siege weapons, let alone to hire rat-catchers and dentists to raise "morale."

By contrast, the naval combat shows inventiveness and rewards careful tactics.

Galleys are also mobile barracks that can pump out infantry units while at sea, including drummers and sailors that enable you to ram and grapple other vessels, respectively. Although it involves sailing into an enemy hull at just the right angle and moment, in addition to a bit of luck and guesswork that feels unintentional, ramming an enemy hull to splinters and watching the drowning of an enemy hero (or villain) and myriad floundering sailors never fails to amuse. Grappling hooks, on the other hand, don't always take on the first try, even when your position's perfect, and parking your ships to allow troops to board often feels like threading a needle with a haystack. The phoned-in rudimentary interface doesn't help.

Although the Persians and the Romans appear only as the respective antagonists, the Greeks and Egyptians both get desultory single-player campaigns that manage to nail every dreaded trademark single-player mission beat. There's the grueling kill-100-archers-before-time-runs-out, the boss fight, the convoy escort, the maze, and the siege waves, and all are punctuated with apathetically staged cutscenes featuring posed action figures spouting dialogue Joseph Barbera would have called cardboard. Even though many missions have you playing strictly in hero mode, the tasks are so tedious and frustrating that heroic is the last thing you'll feel. Contrary as it sounds to say so, there's way too much hero command in the single-player, and not enough in the multi-.

Other features just convey an air of resignation, from the boxy graphics and spartan (not Spartan) textures to a coyly named smart-formation key that's neither smart nor your friend. Lazy logical lapses abound: Cavalry can't gallop up stairways, even though we've seen real horses navigate them in movies beyond number, and units mysteriously lose their special training when put into new formations or embarked on ships. Ladder teams wander alongside enemy walls on their own cryptic agendas. Being atop walls seems to offer little reprieve from archer fire below. And, although the vaguely optimized code is subject to stutters even in single-player, it only gets worse online, with intermittent lag spikes, frequent disconnects, a lack of customizability options, and very little sense of future developments.

Rise & Fall means well. There's nothing wrong with yet another go at this tried-and-true setting—but it requires passion and fresh eyes, not ones attached to heads on chopping blocks. Hero command is an intriguing notion, but as handled here it's little more than a half-baked distraction. The naval battles, for all their awkwardness, modest size, and rarity, offer tactical intricacies and a verisimilitude without which *Rise & Fall* would look truly anemic. Considering the competition out there and the ever-rising stakes, good intentions and mere competence are no longer enough. **–Kelly Wand**

Greek Game Reviewed

The generically named Diablo clone **Titan Quest** delivers too much of a good Greek thing BY BRETT TODD

★ ★ ★ ½

Genre Action RPG **Developer** Iron Lore Entertainment
Publisher THQ **ESRB** Teen **Requirements** 1.8GHz CPU; 512MB RAM

Titan Quest is a really dumb name. It makes this game sound like a Saturday morning kiddie show from the '70s. If you mention it to anybody outside of game geekdom, you inevitably get a response like "Yeah, I loved that one. Didn't it come on between *Bugs Bunny* and *Far Out Space Nuts*?"

But this is one of those not infrequent cases where bad names happen to (fairly) good games. This unabashed *Diablo* knock-off from Iron Lore Entertainment is a respectable shot at giving the hacky-slashy crowd something different. Innovative character development and the unique venues of ancient Greece, Egypt, and China give the click-and-loot genre more life than it's had in years, although at times you're given too much of a good thing.

Most of the game's mojo is provided by the offbeat story and setting. Instead of the expected Elf land, the backdrop here is the real ancient Greece. You begin as a Greek hero checking out the local tourist hotspots listed in the 500 BC edition of Frommer's, then set sail for Egypt, and finally wind things up in China. Everything looks terrific, although there is a bit of slowdown at night and in some indoor scenes with lots of light sources. Maps are decked-out with gorgeous ruined temples, cyclopean palaces, and sphinxes. It's like an interactive History Channel special where you kill things.

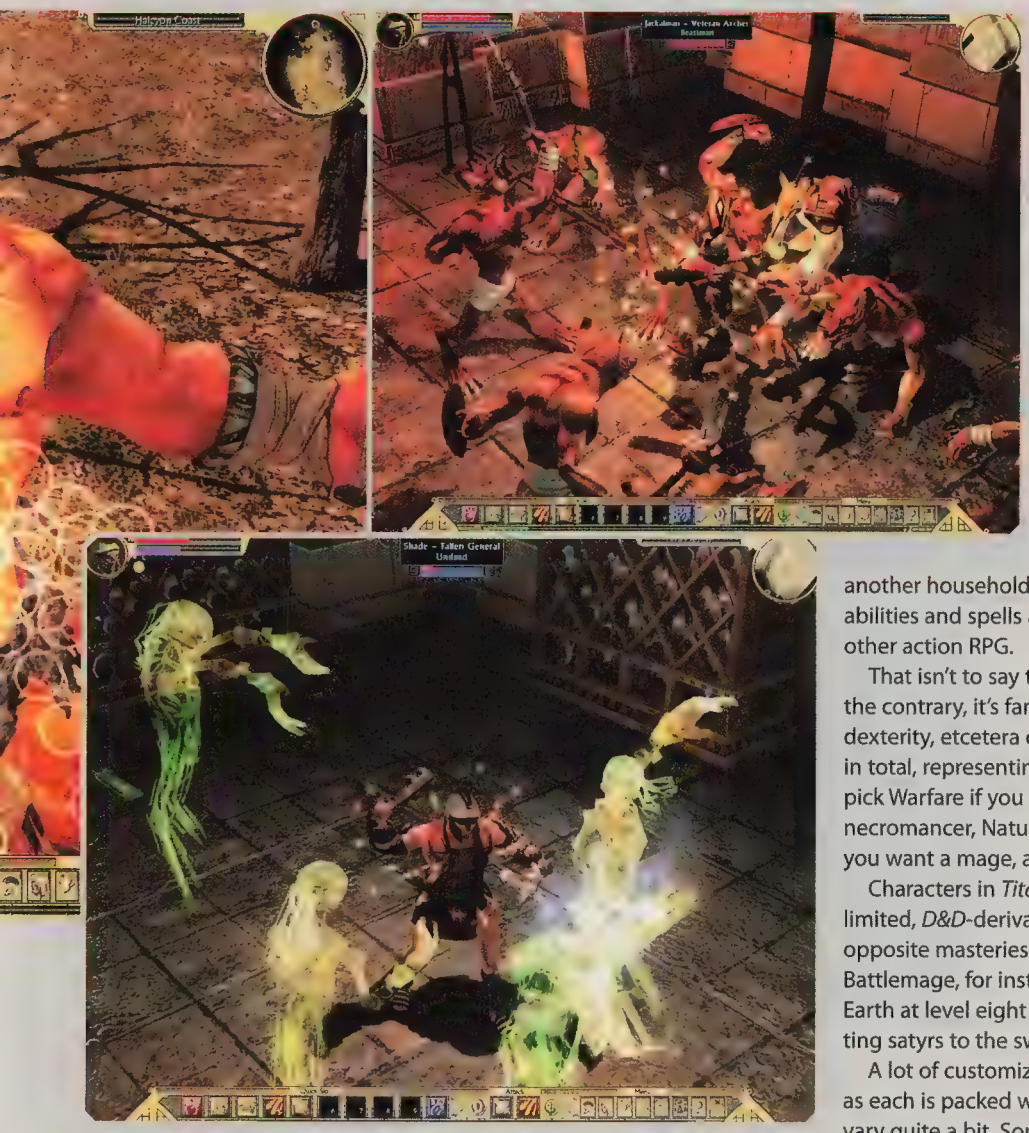
"Maps are decked-out with gorgeous ruined temples, cyclopean palaces, and sphinxes. It's like an interactive History Channel special where you kill things."

Of course, this isn't a documentary. This version of the ancient world comes complete with mythological beasts and gods. Greece is overrun by escapees from Homer and Hesiod, including satyrs, maenads, minotaurs, and cyclopes. Egypt is packed with jackalmen and scorpions, and China is full of tigermen and dragons. Most of the story hinges on the Greek pantheon, though, as you fight evil titans who have unleashed monsters on the world and cut mankind off from Zeus and pals.

Sound good? For the most part, it is. Packs of baddies attack you at a *Serious Sam* pace every time you turn a corner. The speed and challenge of combat are set at such a pitch that you can't help being hypnotized by the relentless, rhythmic clicking. You need to fight with one hand on the mouse and the other on the hotkeys, ready to rip off a spell or quaff a potion at a second's notice.

But *Titan Quest* still drags. Many levels have been stretched to the "When the hell is this going to end?" point. You get a campaign that clocks in at an impressive 40 hours, but there are way too many unnecessary satyr villages, undead cemeteries, and tigerman tribes. Too many crypts and caverns turn into incredibly long and wearying mazes. And save points—there is no save-on-demand feature, so you're resurrected at magic fountains—are often spaced widely apart for no apparent reason except to stretch the game out by making you hike back to the spot where you were killed. Much of the time, you don't even get a save point right before a boss battle, which is nothing short of sadistic in levels like the massive maze at Knossos. At least you can zip between the countryside and the cities with your handy portal stone.

All of this padding mildly unbalances the game, too. Take a conscientious approach to clearing maps and cracking open every chest and coffer, and you soon become a Croesus with hundreds of thousands of gold pieces. Before the midway point of the



[left to right] Take Odysseus's word for it—don't mess with a cyclops; Neat spooky ghosts and all, but you could toss these guys into any old fantasy hack-and-slasher and they wouldn't look out of place; Those souvenir sellers hanging out around the pyramids don't take no for an answer.

game, you've collected enough coin to stock a virtually unlimited supply of health potions. Enemies are so numerous that you can't quaff the elixir quickly enough to survive many onslaughts, although you can typically run away, suck one back, and then return to the fray. Exercise the better part of valor smartly, and you won't die much, even in the boss battles.

Iron Lore doesn't take the mythological angle as far as it should. *Titan Quest*'s monster menagerie is bolstered by too many refugees from *D&D* and Tolkien. Skeletons, zombies, and wraiths pack the tombs of the Peloponese just as they do the tombs of the Forgotten Realms. There are so many giant spiders in the woods around Delphi that you might as well be wandering through Mirkwood with Bilbo. And most weapons and magical artifacts are stock fantasy swords, shields, rings, and the like, so the loot is pretty generic. (You have to keep a close eye on your dull stash, though, because the cramped inventory forces you to cull your stock all the time.) The only ode to actual ancient goodies is embodied by shards representing pieces of artifacts like the Golden Fleece and Prometheus' Flame.

Character development also borrows more from traditional fantasy role-playing than from the Greek mythology that supposedly inspires hero creation. While there are some great ideas here, chiefly the decision to drop formal classes for choosing skill masteries at levels two and eight, the toga-party premise isn't played up. Aside from the odd tip of the trident to the Elysian Fields, Amun-Re, or another household name from ancient mythology, the abilities and spells are interchangeable with those of any other action RPG.

That isn't to say that the skill system doesn't work. On the contrary, it's fantastic. Along with the usual strength, dexterity, etcetera core stats, there are eight skill masteries in total, representing all of the stereotypical class types. So pick Warfare if you want a fighter, Spirit if you want a necromancer, Nature if you want a druid, Earth or Storm if you want a mage, and so on.

Characters in *Titan Quest* aren't rolled up according to a limited, *D&D*-derivative template. You can take completely opposite masteries and create hybrid classes like the Battlemage, for instance. Pick Warfare at level two and Earth at level eight and you'll soon have the option of putting satyrs to the sword or frying them with fiery spells.

A lot of customization is possible within masteries, too, as each is packed with over a dozen individual skills that vary quite a bit. Someone with the Rogue mastery, for example, can go the assassin route and concentrate on buffing deadly skills like Mortal Wound and Envenom Weapon, or they can play the thief with tricky talents such as Lay Trap and Flash Powder. Characters with the Hunting mastery can do the Aragorn thing with Trail Blazing and Wood Lore, or they can follow in the footsteps of Legolas thanks to bow-centric skills like Marksmanship and Puncture Shot. Best of all, if you regret any skill choices later, you can visit a mystic and rearrange things to your liking for a small fee.

As in most action-oriented RPGs, you can eliminate a lot of the workmanlike atmosphere and balance the niggles by buddying up and tackling the campaign in the multiplayer mode. Up to six players can venture online to face the evils of the ancient world together. The game also includes a map editor and mod tools for creating custom multiplayer levels.

Even if *Titan Quest* doesn't deliver on its promise of letting you hang out with Homer, this is a cut above the average *Diablo* clone. Its biggest disappointment is that Iron Lore artificially draws out the campaign, but the story and setting are still standouts. ■

Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth

Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn

★ ★ ★ ½

Genre Creepfest **Developer** Headfirst
Publisher Bethesda **ESRB** Mature
Requirements 800MHz CPU; 256 MB RAM

[top to bottom] The people of Innsmouth all have an Uncle Fester look about them; This is what happens when you pray to underwater Pagan Gods; Another casualty of the horrors of Innsmouth.

After a long road to completion, Headfirst's romp through the disturbing world of H.P. Lovecraft, *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth*, isn't too bad. In fact, it's one of the most faithful adaptations of the Cthulhu Mythos outside of the Chaosium role-playing game. It's safe to say that, if you own one of those cute little Cthulhu plush toys, this is your game.

You play the role of a 1920s private investigator by the name of Jack Walters, who, in the game's prologue, is exposed to some of the Mythos beings that make mortal men go completely cuckoo. Jack suffers a six-year bout of amnesia due to this little episode and tries to get his life back in order. He takes on a case that leads him to the small port town of Innsmouth, where he loses even more of his sanity, dodges bullets, solves puzzles, and comes face to face with those unspeakable horrors that make Lovecraft's tales so memorable.

Dark Corners of the Earth is played from a first-person perspective, but this is in no way a run-and-gun first-person shooter. This is an action/adventure, where stealth—particularly in the first half of the game—and not brawn is required to survive. You don't even acquire a weapon until the game is nearly half over.

The narrative does a poor job of explaining exactly why Jack, a professional P.I., comes to Innsmouth unarmed, without the ability to punch out bad guys. (He doesn't even have a flashlight, making him the worst investigator ever.) In many early scenes, you're literally running away and hiding from people that are trying to kill you. You can't even defend yourself with your knuckles.

Still, the game's bread and butter are the investigating, puzzle solving, and sneaking. The gunplay is actually the weakest part of the game and feels almost tacked on. This flaw can be attributed in part to the less-than-stellar character models and overall graphics package. Headfirst spent more than five years getting *Cthulhu* out the door, and it definitely shows.

The dated graphics can be overlooked to an extent. You certainly don't need cutting-edge visuals to tell a great story or to have the pants scared off you. And this is one of the more creepy games on the market, even if some of the methods used are a tad cliché. (Creepy little girls are scary, but they tend to get used a lot these days.) It does a fantastic job of setting mood, using music to build tension, and providing the type of gameplay that makes your palms a bit sweaty as you slowly turn a corner for fear of what you might stumble on. There's no interface clutter whatsoever, and this helps draw you into the macabre story, because you're not eyeing health meters and ammo counters. It's easy enough to tell when Jack is hurt or losing his mind, because he starts muttering crazy things as paranoia sets in, and you can hear him wince when he walks if he's taken too much damage.

The game's big problem isn't setting or story; it's its frustrating save game system. There are sequences that are agonizingly difficult, where one wrong turn means you're spotted, chased down, and executed. Doubling this difficulty is the fact that you can't save when and where you want. You have to find save checkpoints, and even though these locations are liberally spread throughout each area, many sequences require you to get through very tough portions before saving. Replaying a section over and over simply is not fun, and it's certainly not scary the 10th time you try it.

If you can stomach the difficulty and the middle-of-the-road graphics, *Dark Corners of the Earth* offers a lot of suspense-filled gameplay in the 10 or so hours it takes to complete the adventure. Even if you don't know a Shaggoth from a sea turtle. **–William Abner**

Hearts of Iron II: Doomsday

War without end

★ ★ ★ ★

Genre What War is Good For **ESRB** Everyone
Developer/Publisher Paradox Interactive
Requirements 800MHz CPU; 128MB RAM

Doomsday is a lot of game for 20 bucks. It includes the original *Hearts of Iron II*, with its sophisticated simulation of the Second World War. Then this expanded version adds another half-dozen years and new strategic options. So it has something for everyone, or at least anyone interested in Paradox's deep historical strategy games. *Doomsday* does nothing to make the game itself more intuitive or appealing to those who don't have the fever. But for those who do, *Doomsday* has enough to make the entire package stronger.

The expanded time frame takes you into the early years of the Cold War. A new superpower war scenario opens with a nuclear strike on Moscow and puts the Western Allies on the defensive from there on out. The years beyond 1947 include the possibility of creating Israel in the Middle East or liberating Korea. The added years also mean more technology is explored.

The time-line still seems to end arbitrarily. There is nothing special about 1953, and you can find yourself in the early stages of an anti-Communist war and then run out of time. There is no easy solution to this problem, but the addition of more years just makes you eager for another decade to keep democracy on the march.

The most important addition is the new intelligence system. One of the flaws of *Hearts of Iron* was that you always knew the total composition of your enemies' armies via the information panel. Now your information is imperfect, but you can send spies to keep you abreast of their research and production priorities. You have a range of subversion activities, too, but spies are most useful for getting the dirt on your enemies.

None of these additions radically alter what is already a good game. Patches had already significantly improved the core game, and *Divided Nation* is just the cherry on top of a cheesecake of world conflict.

–Troy S. Goodfellow

[below] Remaking Europe. [right] Tech development is still enjoyable.

Starstruck

Everyone has an opinion on the games they've played, and some post reader reviews on websites like amazon.com and ebgames.com. Here are some "real gamer" views of some current releases, in their words, with their own unique interpretations of the English language.

Guild Wars Factions

"I'm a 36 year old woman with more hours logged on this game than I care to mention. … Games don't get any better than this." ★★★★★

"After loving Guild Wars, I'm uninstalling Factions. IMO, this is cafe-monkey fodder or a PvP/Raid only title. Yech, from me, a rpg fan." ★★

Half-Life 2: Episode I

"The Half-Life 2 game premise is about fighting against being controlled. How ironic is it that, the game's maker put in STEAM activation software, which basically controls your PC … Steam is worse than Starforce." ★★

"2 hours to activate, then an annoying program running in the background for ever more. Way to ruin another good game. Whoever invented steam needs to shot in the head." ★

Heroes of Might and Magic V

"The game is great, but if you have a windows xp other than 2000 (which I do Windows xp 2002 home edition) one cannot save any games. This is awful, not being able to ever save. REALLY BAD." ★

"I'm sorry to say this, but at the moment this game is a joke. … the high rating is based on hope." ★★★★

Hitman: Blood Money

"I have no clue how anyone with reasonable intelligence could give this game 4 stars, let alone 3. DO NOT WASTE YOUR MONEY!!!!!!!!!!!!" ★

"My advice: spend your money wisely and don't buy shoddy products from any game developer. Stick to good well-rounded names like: ID, Atari. Avoid at all cost for PC: Eidos, EA Games, Ritual, Valve, 'Steam' & 'Steampowered' products." ★

See Me, Hear Me, Feel Me... Yuck

Check your head at the door for Human Head's **Prey**, which delivers big, dumb, and disgusting Native American entertainment BY STEVE BAUMAN

★★★★½

Genre Topsy Turvy Shooter **Developer** Human Head
Publisher 2K Games **ESRB** Mature **Requirements** 1.5GHz CPU; 512MB RAM

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

As another summer of brain-numbing Hollywood blockbuster entertainment winds down, it's time to reflect on why we love these movies so. Or at least why we hate to love them. We have such low expectations of these movies that all they have to do is not suck to merit a solid thumbs-up. We accept certain contrivances, we demand rollercoaster rides, we expect nonstop action, and we live with obvious storytelling.

We have similar expectations for our blockbuster games. Most aspire to Michael Bay-style spectacle, with all its positive and negative connotations, and that description fits *Prey*. It's loud, it's bold, it's in your face. Subtle it ain't. It has a few twists here and there but mostly adheres to formula: It's a rigidly linear corridor shooter with a lousy narrative and mundane AI. (It has some interesting multiplayer modes, but because this review was done before the game shipped to stores, they weren't tested. We will follow up on that feature next month.)

You control Tommy, a Native American living life on a reservation somewhere. He's kind of an ass, pressuring his girlfriend Jen to leave the reservation because, well, he wants to leave. He also dismisses his grandfather for holding onto those Native American beliefs, one of which is apparently a love of alcohol, since Pops sidles up to the bar and pounds a cold one after your opening conversation.

After a short intro scene where Tommy gets to beat up some white guys, aliens show up looking for some grub and abduct Tommy, his grandfather, and his girlfriend. (Get it? You're now "prey." Clever.) This scenario is supposed to be Tommy's chance to gain redemption and to attempt to connect with his Native Americanness and save his people. All it really shows is his narcissism. Throughout the game, he only cares about his own needs. He wants to find his girlfriend and he wants vengeance (in that order). He has little concern for anyone else in this alien world, even though they're clearly suffering. (There's some strong stuff here.)

The story is full of the usual overdone and clichéd Native American spirituality, including your "Spiritual Hawk" companion. Yikes. It's like Stoner Philosophy 101: "They're down with the land, man... even while gunning down room after room of aliens." And when Tommy's not stating the obvious—"Jesus Christ, what is this place?"—he's responding to lines like "Emotion clouds your judgment" with "Fuck you!"

Fortunately, the lame narrative is offset by the superb gameplay. Its formulaic parts are buffed to near-perfection; its twists are clever and interesting. It uses "portals," which are somewhat hard to describe but add an interesting twist to standard levels. They allow monsters to "warp" into areas. Unlike the heavily criticized monster closets of *DOOM 3*, it's an internally consistent con-

[opposite page left] Disgusting. [above, clockwise from upper left] When you die, you go to the Spirit World and fight your way back to the living; This guy's very spiritual; The great adventures—well, space at least—produces some jaw-dropping visuals; Yes, you can play this; Yikes. Trying to figure out how to get from point A to B is one of the more interesting challenges.

trivance—aliens can make portals, so of course they'll warp to your location. More often, the portals let developer Human Head create "impossible" levels, such as a full room that appears to exist entirely inside a box. (There are also a number of clever tricks involving planetary surfaces and different scales.)

The technology used throughout *Prey* is superb. The *DOOM 3* engine is as shiny as ever, and it retains the obsessive attention to detail of id Software's original game. *Prey* certainly isn't "pretty" in any conventional sense. Everything from the levels themselves to the weapons found on the spaceship is consistently organic and alien looking. In fact, everything is downright disgusting. Squishy, even. The walls ooze; creatures emerge from vagina-like slits; sphincters spew out explosive balls of organic material or projectile vomit all sorts of unknown waste products. Yes, this is an M-rated game. The sound also does a terrific job of conveying just how gross this place is—it makes you want to shower after an extended play session. (The less said about the voice acting, the better.)

More impressive is the way all this technology is used to create some fantastic places to play in. While *Prey* doesn't have the epic set pieces of a *Half-Life 2*, most of the levels are interesting. They also have actual puzzles. You often find yourself figuring out how to get from Point A to Point B, and it never involves jumping. Human Head has really nailed the difficult task of directing you through these complex environments without making it feel like you're being led through them. In most cases, you navigate the environments either by altering a room's gravity, causing it to spin around, or by turning on machines that allow you to walk on walls in certain areas. You never lose your orientation, because the game does a brilliant job of using visual cues—like airflows, visible debris, and relatively "normal" environments—to help orient the player. There are some areas where you need to have "out of body" Native American experiences in order to manipulate objects; in some instances, you leave your body on a platform, flip a switch, and watch as you're carried off to another location. There's even a 3D version of a sliding tile puzzle (kind of). To *Prey*'s considerable credit, these are actual puzzles with "By jove, I've got it" moments. They don't break up the action; if anything, they serve as buffers between larger action bits.

In fact, it's too bad there aren't more of them. Two-thirds of the single-player game is fantastic, but the other third throws out much of the cool stuff and replaces it with totally conventional, repetitive, and dull combat and boss fights. (Lots of designers must worship *Star Castle*, because it's the go-to game for these big battles.) At least Human Head and 3D Realms nail the difficulty, so it's never frustrating. This is a game you will finish because it (optionally) scales its difficulty level to your ability. If you die, you can either reload or "fight" your way back to life in its "death walking" mode. Actually, you don't need to fight, as you can just sit there and eventually return to the game; however, if you shoot more of the "spirits" (or whatever they are), you recover more health. It's a clever mechanic. While it's as annoying to keep fighting your way back to life as it is to keep hitting reload, at least you're never pulled out of the game by a "loading…" screen.

Prey never really lets up. Even in its slower moments, you're doing something interesting or wallowing in something disgusting. It's exactly like one of those big-budget Hollywood summer blockbusters: You wish it gave your brain as much of a work-out as your finger, but there's no question that its superb action, terrific pacing, and actual puzzles combine to make *Prey* the best single-player first-person shooter since *Half-Life 2*. ■

Hitman: Blood Money

Dirty deeds, done dirt cheap

★ ★ ½

Genre Contract-killer Sim **Developer** IO Interactive
Publisher Eidos Interactive **ESRB** Mature
Requirements 1.5GHz CPU; 512MB RAM

In the old days, just about any old computer would run a *Hitman* game. The Eidos Interactive franchise featuring the contract-killing Mr. Clean known only as Agent 47 was typically made with console systems in mind, so any PC worth its salt had zero problems depicting all the razor-wire-murdering goodness.

Hitman: Blood Money, the fourth release in the series, is an absolute performance pig. It's marred by slowdown during firefights, sluggish mouse movement when gunning down guards and navigating menus, and between-mission cutscenes that are too choppy to comprehend.

Sadly, there seems to be a good game buried under all the technical flaws. Although it's impossible to say much about the story, as the frame-rate during cutscenes plummets so dramatically that you miss every second word of dialogue and barely get the gist of a tale about clones, the gameplay here is a cut above 2004's mediocre *Hitman: Contracts*. IO Interactive has taken more time with level design, spruced up the AI, and added new moves for 47.

Missions have received the most attention. Assignments are still designed with the series' trademark "Get in, kill people, get out" template, but locales are more varied than ever, and maps are extraordinarily intricate. Locations like a Chilean drug hacienda, the Paris Opera House, a California rehab clinic, New Orleans during Mardi Gras, and the White House look fantastic, with loads of detail in every room, great atmospheric audio, and level-appropriate soundtrack tunes.

Each setting features dozens of ways to get to your targets. Best of all, you're never forced to take the direct approach. Almost every mission allows you to set up "accidents" and take out victims on the sly. Grab a disguise and do some exploring, and you'll soon discover that you can skip shooting the ambassador at the opera house and just drop a chandelier on him. Get behind gangsters hanging out on balconies on the river boat, and you can trigger a wave of "suicides." There is a lot of room to be inventively malevolent here.

[top] Sorry, but I'm doing a little painting around the house this weekend and will need some overalls. [above] Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. And I hope you've got nowhere else to be, as this is gonna take a while. [right] Bribe the right people and the cops will be looking for this guy.

Still, levels in *Hitman: Blood Money* aren't exactly wide open. Unlike previous releases in the series, this one makes it insanely tough to attack missions as if you are playing a shooter, at least on the default difficulty setting. One nonsilenced shot goes off and you're almost instantly surrounded by gangs of guards.

There is little chance of surviving encounters with these goon squads, moreover, because just a couple of enemies onscreen cause the frame-rate to plummet and the mouse cursor to move as if you're dragging it through mud. If IO is trying to address criticisms to the effect that earlier *Hitman*

games were too easy for Rambo wannabes, mission accomplished.

Sneaky stuff can be quirky, as well. Movement in general feels clunky, especially given that you're supposed to be the world's most deadly assassin. Guards are more aware of you than ever before and will turn around at the slightest noise. Your creep speed with razor-wire at the ready is now so slow that it's tough to catch up with walking guards in order to pull off quiet kills.

Some basic moves have been automated, so it's easy to alert guards unintentionally by accidentally jumping across a gap or climbing in a window. And positioning is overly touchy, forcing you to be in just the right place to hit an elevator button, pick up ammo, or grab a disguise.

Other changes are more beneficial. New combat actions liven up the ways in which 47 takes out foes. Notoriety is now tracked through the entire game. Screw up an assignment by getting spotted too often or by getting your mug captured on closed-circuit TV cameras, and you'll have to spend big bucks on bribes to prevent guards from recognizing you in subsequent levels. Cash can now be spent on dozens of weapon upgrades that carry forward from level to level, allowing you to add such niceties as laser sights and door-penetrating ammo.

Were it not for performance issues, *Hitman: Blood Money* would be a worthwhile play for anyone into the franchise's nihilistic humor. So, if you really want to keep up with Agent 47's latest hits, consider buying it for a console. In the game's present state on the PC, assassinations are accompanied by way too much aggravation. **–Brett Todd**

Daemonica

It's daecent

★ ★ ½

Genre Aedventure **Developer** RA Images/Cinemax
Publisher Meridian4 **ESRB** Teen
Requirements 1GHz CPU; 256MB RAM

In the beginning, demons created the heavens and the earth. Using an ancient and powerful tongue called Daemonica, they gave shape to the formless and life to the inert. And the demons saw that it was good. And then they took a vacation.

Millennia later, Nicholas Farepoynt skulks around medieval England as one of the Beast Hunters, a sect of lone warriors who stalk the most heinous killers of the day and mete out just and brutal punishment. Since the Batcave will not be invented for another 600 years, Nick uses a more direct forensic technique in his homicide investigations: He poisons himself to the brink of death and then uses remnants of the forgotten Daemonica to speak to the deceased victims.

Daemonica casts you in the role of this solitary badass as he probes a gruesome murder in the cursed hamlet of Cavorn. As you track down clues by talking to the village's unusual suspects, a sinister tale of politics, greed, and ruin is slowly revealed. Despite the purple prose that underlines Nick's dark and tortured existence, the compelling storyline is the game's strongest asset.

Unfortunately, the rest of *Daemonica* is less gripping. When you're not chatting up the locals, you must repeatedly jog through town and tediously search for the herbs that facilitate your interviews with the dead. The puzzles are either obvious or obscure. The combat sequences capture *Diablo*'s simplicity but with 100% fewer thrills. The loading screens are omnipresent. This "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* meets *Columbo* meets *Medium*" concept shows potential, but, in the end, *Daemonica* only creates disappointment. **–Justin Fletcher**

Daemonica : Demons aren't into Feng Shui.

Condemned: Criminal Origins

Alone in the dark, armed with a mouse and keyboard

★ ★ ★

Genre Sneaky Action **Developer** Monolith
Publisher Sega **ESRB** Mature
Requirements 2GHZ CPU; 512MB RAM

There's something to be said for a control scheme's power to elevate a game from relative mediocrity. *Condemned: Criminal Origins* was an Xbox 360 launch title. While its depressing serial killer storyline set in a dark, gritty, *Se7en*-inspired world was a nice alternative to the candy-colored ones found in *Kameo*, it was still a linear and repetitive grind through monochromatic environments.

Condemned: This won't end well.

You control an FBI agent who, in the process of investigating a serial killer, is suddenly implicated in the crimes. It's still "CSI for Dummies," in that you're pretty much told what to do as you "investigate" the goings-on and try to save your butt. Although the visuals for the PC version look virtually identical to those for the 360, moving it to the PC improves it as a game, in part because the mouse and keyboard form a superior interface. At least that's true for a game that's about skulking in dark places, where you're more often afraid of the inevitable fight than aggressively pursuing it. The mouse lets you flick your viewpoint around and explore the nooks and crannies of the environments; too bad they're still boring and monochromatic. But, because you now spend more time looking around, you actually end up even more paranoid, convinced that something is out there to get you.

The hand-to-hand melee combat is okay. The 360 version uses the analog flippers to punch and smack people over the head with all of the found weapons—the environments have the most pipes and boards with nails in them per square foot of any place in the world. By contrast, the PC version settles for mouse buttons.

It's still over too quickly, and there's little explanation of why you're running around these ruined buildings beating up drug addicts. The PC version of *Condemned* also lacks the draw of completing everything just to get a few extra Xbox Live Gamerscore points. But it pulls off its creepy atmosphere well enough to carry you through to its entertainingly dreary dénouement. **–Steve Bauman**

Rogue Trooper

Eidos/Teen ★★½

It isn't easy being blue. It also isn't easy to stand out when you're a generic shooter based on a relatively obscure graphic novel. Such is the fate of Rebellion's noisy little game. Its one interesting hook—you can "install" fallen teammates to obtain their abilities—turns into the usual "deploy the special feature at very specific locations to advance in the level" situation. Between those moments of obviousness are some solid battles in large areas, but it's nothing that isn't done better elsewhere. Brief bits of tactical decision making—you can take cover—aren't particularly developed while everything around you is exploding with great frequency. Multiplayer features cooperative play against the AI, which is entertaining when you can actually find a game. Everything about *Rogue Trooper* screams "competent," which doesn't amount to memorable or particularly inspired. It's just that game about that blue guy. **–SB**

Keepsake

The Adventure Company/Everyone ★½

Whoever wrote *Keepsake*'s tagline, "An Unforgettable Adventure," must have a dark sense of humor. As memorable as yesterday's breakfast, it squanders excellent puzzles on crappy characters and a dull narrative. You play Lydia, a student mage arriving for her first day at the now deserted Dragonvale Academy. Assisted by strange visions and a talking wolf, you scour for the missing teachers, students, and staff. The story lacks subtlety and dramatic tension—it feels like a Harry Potter fanfic written by bored 11-year-olds. Although attractive, it has no mood or atmosphere; bright and sunny Dragonvale feels less like a crime scene than a vacant Wal-Mart. At least the puzzles are engaging. They're well balanced, and most are brainteasers as opposed to fetch-quests or arbitrary combination riddles. Still, good puzzles do not an entertaining game make. Do yourself a favor and forget this *Keepsake*. **–Lara Crigger**

Eets

Klie Entertainment/Not Rated ★★★★½

This little game is as addictive, if not more so, as gems like *Bejeweled*, *Bookworm*, or pretty much any downloadable puzzle game out there. *Eets*' gameplay brings to mind the *Incredible Machine* games, challenging you to use logic and strategy to navigate a little guy, "Eets," from start to finish through some very tricky situations on a single screen of structures and obstacles by placing a set of objects into the gameworld. The physics model prevents each retry from behaving completely the same way, so there's often more than one solution—and sometimes unexpected ones that even the creator probably didn't anticipate. There's a mode in which you can design original puzzles to upload and share via MSN or the Eets website, but no one (so far) has the designer's flair for getting the physics just right, so that each puzzle is eventually solvable without being predictable. Look for it at Eetsgame.com. All you have to lose are too many hours. And $19.95. **–Cindy Yans**

Agatha Christie: And Then There Were None

Adventure Company/Teen ★★★

Packaged with a copy of the novel on which it's based, *And Then There Were None* puts you in the shoes of, new character Patrick Narracott. Trapped on an island, you proceed to watch as one after another of the game's characters get knocked off. Excellent voice acting helps keep the storyline intriguing, and it's full of simple object-oriented puzzles. Mystery fans will be kept guessing all the way to the end, though a lot of tedious backtracking does its best to kill the suspense. For casual adventure fans, it's a decent alternative to some of the more graphic murder-mystery games, such as last year's superior *Still Life*. **–Tiffany Martin**

revisionist history

By Steve Bauman

King's Bounty

Imagine a game where you choose between four different types of heroes, drawn from familiar fantasy archetypes (which is the fancy way of saying "clichés"). You move your Knight, Paladin, Barbarian, or Sorceress across the land, recruiting creatures to help you stick it to the enemy or uncovering items that give you bonuses in your next battle. Each time you go into battle, the game switches to a chess-like, turn-based tactical strategy format where individual pieces represent anywhere from 1-100 units.

Okay, it's pretty easy to imagine this game. It's *Heroes of Might and Magic*. But this same gameplay could be found in 1990's *King's Bounty*, a less heralded game from *Heroes* creator Jon Van Caneghem and New World Computing. *King's Bounty* was simpler than the first *Heroes of Might and Magic* game. There was a single storyline, casting you as a hero of King Maximus who needed to recover the Sceptre of Order from a guy named Arech Dragonbreath. A map of its resting place was scattered around the world, and it was up to you to find it either through discovery (it was in some random chests found on each map) or by defeating some of Mr. Dragonbreath's minions. It was a timed game, so you had X days to complete your tasks (where X was determined by the game's difficulty level).

"It was never about graphics or the setting; it was always about the eminently likeable gameplay."

It was pretty goofy stuff. Then again, that's always been part of the charm of the *Heroes* series. All versions are unapologetically dorky. It's a giant bag of fantasy clichés, with garishly colorful and… well, the less said about the quality of the individual unit's graphics, the better.

But it was never about graphics or the setting; it was always about the eminently likeable gameplay. Despite the time limit, you never felt rushed, because it was turn-based both in combat and on the overland map. The design was elegant and simple, with a terrific rock/paper/scissors element between units. The game's combination of role-playing and strategy was innovative. Even in the land of DOS and keyboard interfaces, it was extremely easy to play; it was mostly controlled by numbered menus and the arrow keys.

And I so didn't get it.

For whatever reason, I was unable to wrap my brain around this kind of gameplay in 1990. Maybe I was too young, or too stupid, or some combination thereof. I liked RPGs of the day, the various *Ultimas* and their ilk, so I was on board for the general "explore the world and find loot" part of the gameplay. Maybe it was my lack of *D&D* experience or a general disinterest in the wargames of the day, but it took an extremely long time for my adventure-loving gamer brain to get tactical combat, even when it was as simple as it was in *King's Bounty*.

But I kept at it. There was something there. Eventually, the combat started to make sense. Creating better unit mixes, sending the right ones to face off against specific foes—suddenly it all fell into place. One day, I finally took on Arech Dragonbreath and lost. And lost again. I never did defeat the guy, and now I want to find that stupid game and finally finish him off. I'm pretty sure I "get" it now.

After *King's Bounty*, New World Computing became one of my favorite publishers. I devoured the games that followed, like *Might and Magic III* (and its sequels) and *Planet's Edge*. A few years later, New World released the superlative *Heroes of Might and Magic*. It had high-resolution graphics! It had simple, addictive turn-based gameplay! It was *King's Bounty*, re-imagined!

And it was still dorky as all hell. And I still loved it to death. ■

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Diablo

Guild Wars: Factions is the big expansion/sequel that could BY CHRIS HORNBOSTEL

★ ★ ★ ★

Genre MMO. Sort of. **Developer** Arena Net **Publisher** NCSoft **Requirements** 800 MHz CPU, 256MB RAM **ESRB** Teen

Guild Wars crashed the MMO party last year, daring to be different and breathing fresh air into a genre wheezing under the weight of its own conventions. That the original game, now surnamed *Prophecies* to distinguish it from future sequels, rewarded players for being bold and creative was terrific, but it was the "no monthly fees" hook that made it one of the success stories of 2005. *Guild Wars: Factions* doesn't break as much new ground, but this first expansion is still full to bursting with new things to do, and it has a few new tricks to teach the old dog MMOs.

Factions is a stand-alone expansion, so it doesn't require the original game. It offers a completely new game world and campaign, two new classes (the ninja-like Assassin and a dilettante magician, the Ritualist), and 300 new spells and skills. While there's still no monthly fee associated with either the original or the sequel, there's certainly a method to NCSoft's madness. Each iteration taken alone gives you a good feel for the *Guild Wars* experience, but once you've gotten a taste of player-versus-player combat, you'll be itching to have the whole enchilada of unique skills and gear from both *Prophecies* and *Factions* at your disposal.

> **"If Prophecies was all about subverting the dominant paradigm, the sequel isn't shy about busting a few conventions of its own."**

The core gameplay in *Factions* mirrors that of the original. The campaign, quests, and missions take place in instanced zones and may be completed with recruited groups of players or soloed using AI "henchmen." *Factions* still uses the atrociously clunky chat interface/commands of *Prophecies*. You can work around and eventually get used to quirks like the lack of a "/who" command, but you'll wonder why you had to in the first place.

The new setting is the land of Cantha, inspired by Chinese myths and legends. The two new classes fit this setting seamlessly. Assassins emerge as the scourge of support classes, but they are vulnerable to the heavy damage of classic tanks. Ritualists, meanwhile, are able to play a variety of roles, with players using them for defensive shielding or healing backup or as classic damage dealers. Since strategizing optimum characters and brainstorming unique team "builds" is one of the most intriguing aspects of *Guild Wars*, having two new professions and their attendant skills to dither over is a welcome addition.

If *Prophecies* was all about subverting the dominant paradigm, the sequel isn't shy about busting a few conventions of its own. The most obvious example is that any whiff of a leveling grind has been excised from *Factions*. Whereas it might take a month or so of casual play to achieve the level cap of 20 in *Prophecies*, in *Factions* you find yourself halfway there in a day or so, hitting that cap in a week. (That 15-minute grind through level 6 is a killer!) This approach is a bit of a double-edged sword. It's great that you can easily vault into high-level content and the unlocking of better skills and loot, but it also creates a situation where you'll find yourself with nearly two-thirds of the game content remaining after you've maxed out at 20. The promise of better weapons and more unlockables for PvP should be enough to motivate you to soldier on in the campaign, but there's also a tremendous temptation to drop it entirely. The PvP is so addictive that you may end up focusing exclusively on it, thus missing out on a huge portion of the high-end content remaining.

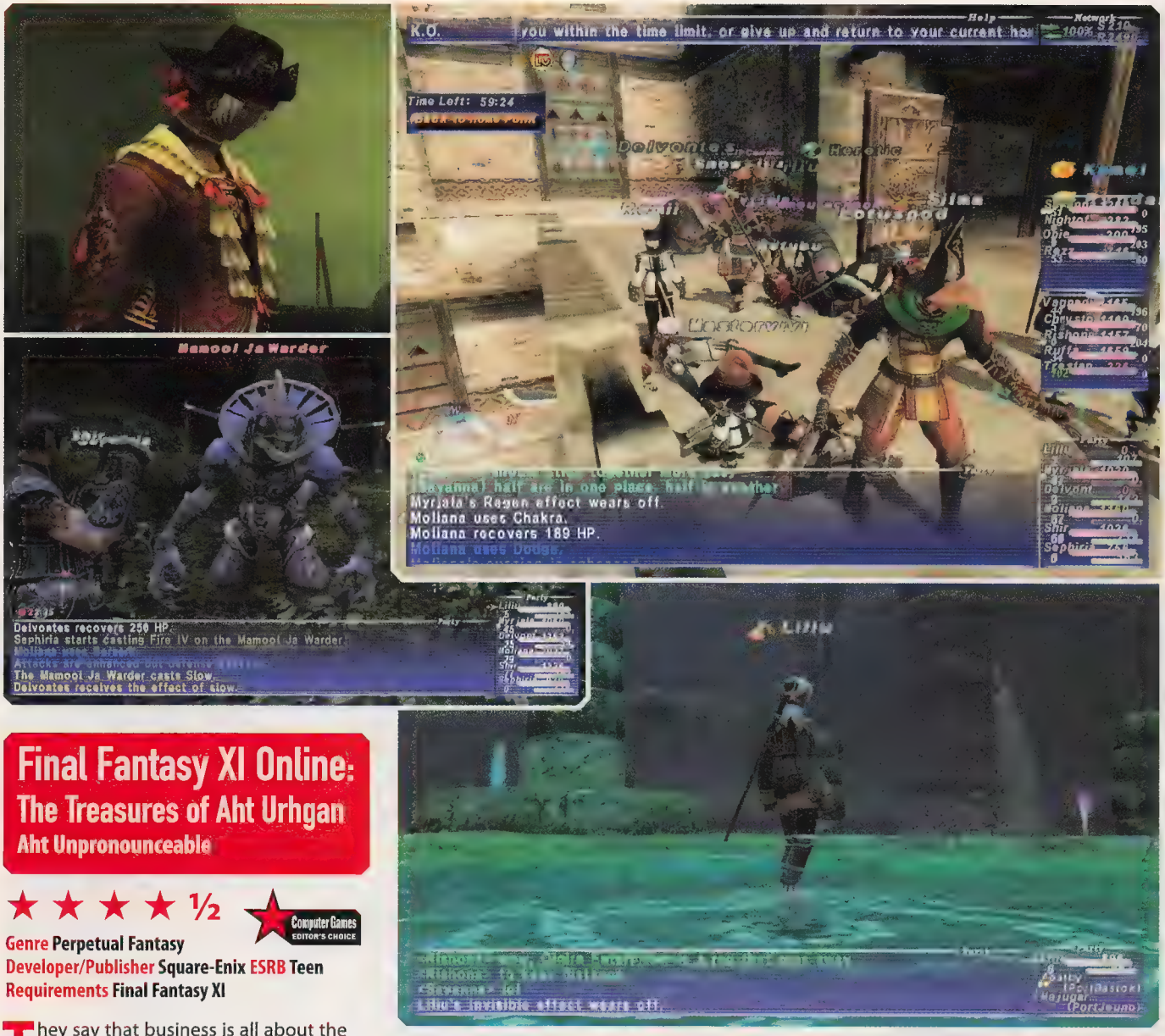
For most players, the main draw of the *Guild Wars* franchise remains the unique strategies of the PvP game. With only eight skill slots, a good Arena match is a lot like trying to play a collectible card game in the middle of a paintball scrum. Like the original, *Factions* lets you skip right over all the trappings of the campaign and find instant gratification with a fully tricked-out character. Although you'll

[clockwise from upper left] Red Dragon Tattoo is just about on me; Only Yukon Cornelius can save us now; "Some Indonesian junk that's going 'round…" The campaign game will have you thwarting the plague devastating Cantha; "Seinfeld! Party of four!" Guild Wars: Factions has the exotic setting nailed.

be competitive to a degree, you'll find your PvP-only characters will need more and better skills that are unlocked to compete with advanced players. *Factions* allows you to cash-in point awards from successful arena battles to unlock new skills and armor upgrades without ever venturing into the "story-line" campaign.

With all the PvP occurring in arena settings, the original *Guild Wars* never really felt much like an MMO, despite being classed as such. Your only interaction with masses of other players was at teeming "hubs" of scum and villainy where the signal-to-noise ratio of people trying to throw together groups on the fly was deafening. To address this, *Factions* introduces the concept of Faction Wars. Guilds now declare allegiance to either the Luxon or the Kurzick side. Through Faction PvP battles and cooperative side-specific missions, the border on the map adjusts to show which rival nation holds the upper hand. There still isn't a whole lot of advantage to "winning"—the merchant resource bonuses and access to resurrection shrines aren't much incentive—but the shifting territory control on the main map represents a good first step toward making *Guild Wars* feel more like an MMO living world.

Although the Faction War at this point is more concept than execution, *Factions* is loaded with new content: the new classes, the new world (which seems larger than the original), and a vast array of new unlockable goodies. That's a very good thing, because there's no getting around the fact that this expansion—stand-alone or not—retails for the same price as the original game. Still, if you were intrigued at all by the PvP aspects of the original design but frustrated by the steep leveling curve—or if you're just brand-new to the game—*Factions* is the best place to jump in and experience one of the deepest and most rewarding franchises in gaming. ■


Mamool Ja Warder
Time Left: 59:24
Myrjala's Regen effect wears off.
Moliana uses Chakra.
Moliana recovers 189 HP.
Delvontes recovers 250 HP.
Sephiria starts casting Fire IV on the Mamool Ja Warder.
The Mamool Ja Warder casts Slow.
Delvontes receives the effect of slow.
Lilly

Final Fantasy XI Online: The Treasures of Aht Urhgan

Aht Unpronounceable

★ ★ ★ ★ ½

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

Genre Perpetual Fantasy
Developer/Publisher Square-Enix **ESRB** Teen
Requirements Final Fantasy XI

They say that business is all about the numbers; no one takes that more seriously than Square-Enix. *Final Fantasy XI*. Eleven! Now there's a third expansion pack! Go ahead and call *Final Fantasy XI Online: The Treasures of Aht Urhgan* number one for quality.

The real treasure here is the addition of new jobs, which is a first for the game's North American player base. The most exciting addition is Pirates—er, Corsairs—but others include Blue Mages and Puppetmasters. As with all the advanced jobs, you have to be 30 levels tall in order to ride, and unlocking the new jobs can be dangerous. Once you're playing as your shiny Pirate—er, Corsair—though, you won't remember the pain of getting it unlocked.

The new content includes Besieged, which lets you defend the city of Aht Urhgan and protect its Astral Candescence, which is both powerful and mysterious. During these battles, you gain experience points but don't lose them when you die. This is a good incentive to take part in the battles, and it's a great place to try new play styles in a consequence-free environment. If you fail, the Candescence is taken by the hordes, and important NPCs can be kidnapped.

If mass PvE combat isn't your thing, there are also new Assault Missions involving puzzle-type 30-minute instances for parties of 3-6 players. Unlike Besieged, these are for people over level 50. Earning enough Assault Points to cash in involves performing many missions in the same area, which means repeating them a few times. The rewards are slick, and they're worth the hassle of maintaining a static party.

Overall, this is a great package, with even more promises down the road, including Chocobo breeding. For players who are already capped in the new advanced jobs and were disappointed that Artifact Armor (AF) wasn't available at launch, AF quests for the new jobs should be available by the time you read this. High demands, good returns? Now that's ace. **–Tiffany Martin**

[clockwise from upper left] He has a name, but just call him Hottie McPirate; Getting killed and not caring is what Besieged is all about; Here's the super-secret Immortal's—er, Blue Mage's—Lair; Mamool Ja or Power Ranger Villain?

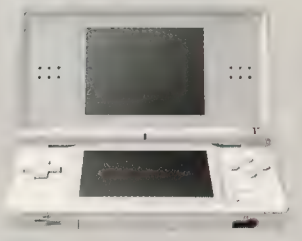
YOUR OTHER SYSTEMS BY TOM CHICK

In an ironic summer twist, it's been pretty slow for console games, yet there has been a slew of prominent and even really good PC releases: *Titan Quest*, *Prey*, *Rise of Legends*, *Half-Life 2: Episode 1*, and sleepers like *City Life* and *Spellforce 2*. Is console gaming dead? (Isn't it nice to be able to slap back with that red herring for a change?)

[clockwise from top] Monster Hunter: Freedom, Field Commander, Urban Chaos: Riot Response, New Super Mario Brothers

It's been a good summer to go outside with your handheld systems. The PSP's **Monster Hunter: Freedom** (Capcom/Teen/★★★★) is probably under your radar, being one of those things that was big enough in Japan to sort of overflow its way to North America. It's Capcom's welcome variation on conventional RPGs, the difference being that you don't really go anywhere. This isn't an epic journey or a dungeon crawl or a story about saving the world. Instead, you leave your town hub for short trips to kill monsters, hack off their teeth, cut out their bones, or skin their hides. Then you go home and use the bits to make better armor and weapons. Also, there's fishing, foraging, mining, and, later in the game, cooking and beekeeping. You can also have a cute little pet pig. He's wearing an adorable striped shirt. It sounds pretty girly, but the manly-man hardcore combat system, the demanding MMO-style gathering and crafting, and some really difficult challenges ensure that this is no *Harvest Moon*.

Field Commander (Sony/Teen/★★) is Sony's answer to handheld strategy gaming. And by "answer," Sony means an almost beat-for-beat remix of *Advance Wars*. Unfortunately, in the few sad stabs it takes at being its own thing, *Field Commander* misses the point. It's a murky 3D engine, with muddled gameplay mechanics and an obtuse interface. The hallmark of *Advance Wars* is simplicity, which requires streamlined interaction, easy-to-access information, and broad visual cues. Sure, you can play *Field Commander* online against strangers, many of whom will bail at the first sign of losing. But if you only have a PSP, your options for strategy gaming are to get *Field Commander* or to get a Nintendo DS. You're far better off getting the DS.



And there's no better time to get a DS than one of those frequent windows when Nintendo lowers the price and raises the specs, as it did last year with the sexy/tiny Micro GBA. This year, it's the flat-out sexy **DS Lite**, which makes the original DS look like a clunky late-'80s prototype. Not only are the screens of a DS Lite better and the stylus more comfortable, but it's less embarrassing to be seen holding one in public.

Along with your DS Lite, you might be tempted to pick up **New Super Mario Brothers** (Nintendo/Everyone/★★★), but beware the hype. It's fine for some familiar old-school koopa-stomping, mushroom-eating, flagpole-jumping, coin-collecting action. But the operative term here is "old school." And it's openly hostile to casual playing, with its limited lives and lack of a save-anywhere. Nintendo sweetened the pot with what feel like dozens of mini-games, and you're liable to find two or three that can hold your attention.

Finally, before you write off your Xbox or give up on shooters for your PS2, keep in mind a gritty and lively shooter called **Urban Chaos: Riot Response** (Eidos/Mature/★★★½). You may remember the original *Urban Chaos*. No? Don't worry, you didn't miss anything. This putative sequel, graced with a license no one can recall, is actually distinctive enough to bear up under its last-gen tech. Although it sometimes has sloppy production values, it's got hearty AAA gunplay, pacing, and replayability. The premise is that you're making America safe from leather-clad, hockey-mask-wearing gang members, who use meat cleavers and Molotov cocktails to attack paramedics and firemen going about the civil service of saving lives. Think *Road Warrior* meets post-9/11 jingoism. It's goofy, satisfying, and unapologetically drenched in hilarious M-rated cussing, blood, and ragdollery. ■

technicalities

by Kevin Rice

Borrowing Innovation

Innovation is dead! Long live innovation!

It's around 7:00 p.m. on a typical weekday. I've been programming all day and need to wind down. The phone rings. It's my girlfriend.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"Well, I nearly have five stars on all the songs on hard mode!" I say enthusiastically.

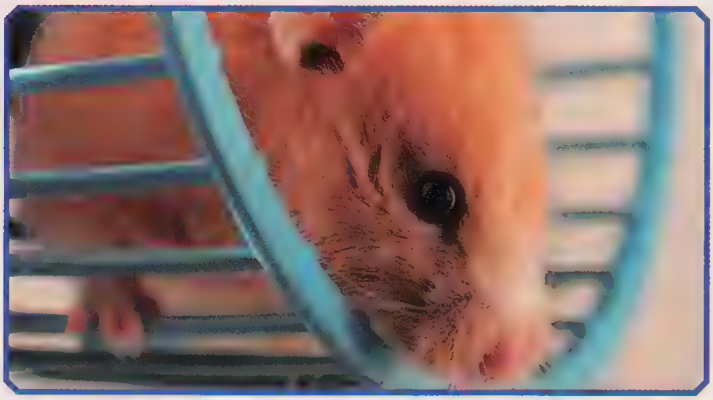
"You're still playing that thing?" she says, laughing.

"Of course! And there's still an expert mode! You have to try this one day. It's unlike anything else I've played."

She's not convinced.

"Don't you have a match tonight in that war thing?"

"Yeah," I say, almost disappointed. "I'll log in there about 30 minutes before start, though, so I still have some time."



"Apparently all we want is 'Massively Multiplayer Treadmill Excitement' and its dozen expansion packs."

"Okay," she says, knowing that I'm a dork. "Call me when that's all done."

As much as I love my first-person shooters and talking on voice chat with friends all over the globe, I've been completely addicted to *Guitar Hero* for the past few months. Yes, it's basically a memorization and coordination test put to cover versions of old and new rock songs, but there's an exhilaration you feel on finally getting that fifth star, especially on something as difficult as "Cowboys From Hell" (damn you, Pantera!). There are similar games out there, like *Beatmania*, *Dance Dance Revolution*, and *Karaoke Party*, but why are there so few on the PC?

There are a few obvious answers to that question. Music-based games are usually more fun with a group of people. Most of these games also require a special controller, be it a plastic guitar, a dance pad, or a microphone. ("Dancing" with a gamepad in *DDR* is like hitting a baseball with a plastic ruler.)

But what about a sleeper hit like *Shadow of the Colossus*, or something like *God of War*? Both could be PC games, but apparently we want "World War II Simulator Version 600" and its sequel. We want "Massively Multiplayer Treadmill Excitement" and its dozen expansion packs. We want something familiar but prettier. We'll learn a new command or two, but we shouldn't have much of a learning curve. We'll eat the bread; forget the cake.

Most of the music-based games don't require anything specific to a console, so what possible reason is there for keeping us from enjoying such innovations on the PC? The answer is simple: The stereotypical PC gamer is satisfied with playing the same game over and over, albeit with prettier graphics. Unless we demand something different, we'll get the same.

You don't need a room full of people, overflowing ashtrays, and empty beer cans to have a party game on the PC. While no one is going to crowd around your 19" flat panel and watch you wail out the solo to "Bark at the Moon," people on computers will definitely congregate online, both to participate and to watch.

Most of these games require very little bandwidth—you either pressed the button at the right time or you didn't—and that leaves room for voice chat and even videos of your opponents playing. The Xbox 360 already explores this a little bit, but with the power of a computer, the opportunities for innovation and creativity increase exponentially. What if, instead of hopping online to slay dragons or kill Nazis (both of which are noble causes), you hopped online to be a spectator of a *DDR* competition? What if you got to duel with guitars instead of swords? What if you could go online to a centralized service and see the great players doing their thing?

As part of my "research" for this column, I spent $15 at my local electronics store and got an adapter that allows me to plug my PS2 controller into my PC via a USB adapter. The guitar already works. The dance pad works. Even the *Beatmania* controller works, including the turntable. These controllers are already here, already familiar, and already functional. What is needed is the audience.

Keep in mind that all these music games were "fringe" or "risky" when they came out. It's nothing like the crazy *Steel Battalion* level of risky, but no one knew for sure there was a market. If some small, independent company developed a viable use for these controllers on the PC, it could turn out to be sitting on a gold mine (and would then probably be acquired by EA). I'm not necessarily talking about replicas of console games. But those games prove that a unique play style with an innovative and fun interface can find an audience.

In the meantime, I'm going to set my phone to mute so I can get that fifth star. ■

Solo Antec/$109 ★ ★ ★ ★

The Solo is essentially Antec's excellent P150 case in black. It also drops the power supply and lowers the cost by $50. It maintains the P150's mission of being a "quiet" case, with sound-deadening material on the side panels and a single 120mm multi-speed exhaust fan. It also has suspension mounts for your hard drives, where they float in midair on rubber bands—that feature is only recommended if you never move your PC. It has a nifty cable organizer on the side of the 5.25 drive bays and remains one of the more subtly good-looking cases on the market. However, one minor nit with its design: the silver façade looks better with the white version. **–Steve Bauman**

Fang Ideazon/$34.99★ ★ ★ ★

The Zboard is a good idea, in theory. It's a gaming keyboard with removable keys that can be swapped out with custom layouts designed for specific games. Its biggest flaw, however, is that it's a mediocre keyboard for day-to-day use. Ideazon's Fang remedies that problem by dispensing with the keyboard part entirely. It's a "gamepad," or more accurately it's the left half of a custom Zboard layout. This stand-alone unit gives you oversized movement keys and easy-to-reach secondary keys while leaving your regular keyboard for that whole "typing" thing. While it's hard to understand why people should have a problem with the standard keyboard they use every day, this is a well-designed, comfortable, and inexpensive controller for anyone looking for a keyboard alternative. **–SB**

CASE MOD OF THE MONTH

Case modder EnVaDoR has a number of interesting case mods at his website, envador.com. They range from the cool (the extremely retro "DialUp") to the disgusting (the infamous "ToiletPC"). *Have an interesting case mod of your own?* Submit it to *editor@cgonline.com.*

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q: The videos for *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* feature incredibly realistic animation. Can you explain how they do this? Is it some new technology or just a refinement of an existing one brought about by increased processing power?

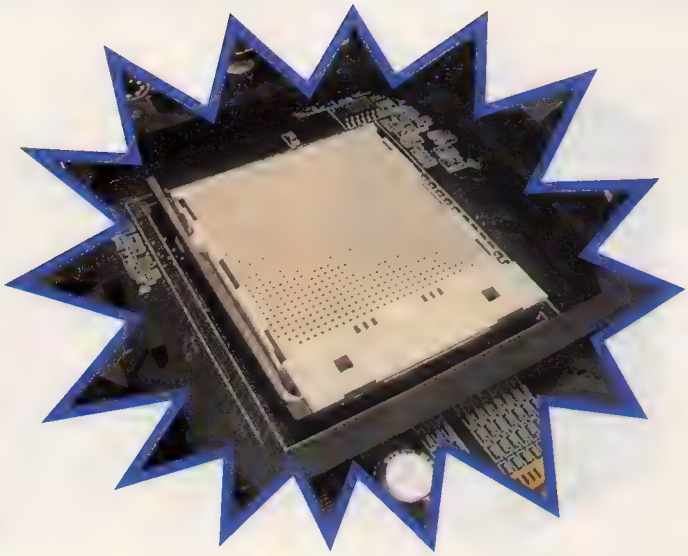
–Michael Timmons

A: Paul Wedgwood, the owner/lead designer for *Quake Wars* developer Splash Damage Ltd., has this to say: "Thanks for the compliment! Splash Damage and id Software worked together to create all the character animations. Our lead artist Frankie Hobbins traveled out to Dallas and used motion capture under the direction of John Root, id Software's lead animator. The motion capture studio was fairly standard, using 16 cameras to capture the data, so I think the quality of the animations simply reflects the direction and effort the actors and id Software's animators have put into making it look good. There's a ton of work needed to clean up and smooth out motion capture data, and I think that this is where the real improvements are made. We've also shot over 2000 animations so far, so in addition to great quality, we have a greater variety of animations in the game, which makes characters appear much more lifelike.

"Alongside the advances made in terrain rendering and physics, this approach to animation has been great because it's allowed us to really reinforce team play in the game. Players are able to see the entire load-out of their teammates, and then unique character movements identify the actions, too. This makes it easier to tell the difference between the Strogg and the Humans in combat and allows players to identify the supporting role their squad-mates are playing, but, perhaps most importantly, it helps players know who to work with to accomplish the game's objectives."

Have a hardware or technology question? Send it to qa@cgonline.com.

Socket AM2 Me



AMD switches to DDR2 with Socket AM2; heads explode from the acronym overdose BY STEVE BAUMAN

There's nothing more fascinating than CPU sockets. We're talking about the actual connector for the brain of your PC, the home for AMD or Intel's finest silicon.

OK, they're not that interesting. They're pieces of plastic-like material with holes in them that let you connect your processor to the motherboard. But their surrounding technology makes them crucial to determining the performance of your gaming PCs.

AMD debuted Socket 939 in 2004. It replaced two interim designs for the then-new Athlon 64 processor, 754 and 940 (the latter was mainly for servers; the former is still used for laptops). Socket 939 has since helped make Athlon 64 the processor of choice for both budget-conscious and performance-minded gamers.

But memory speeds are increasing, and the regular DDR RAM found in 939 systems can't keep up. The final 939 processors are the dual-core Athlon FX-60 and Athlon 4800+ X2; Socket 939 has reached its end. Long live Socket 939.

Its replacement is AM2. If you're looking to buy an AMD-based system today, this is what you want. AM2 includes a number of small tweaks that should light a fire under your inner engineer, but the biggest change arriving with AM2 and its associated processors is support for faster DDR2 RAM, up to DDR2 800 (PC2 6400). Intel made the move over a year ago, though this hasn't helped win it back the performance crown. The RAM was also considerably more expensive for a short time; today it's the same price as regular DDR RAM.

To go along with AM2, AMD released two new CPUs, the FX-62 and 5000+. Both are extremely high-end processors, with the 2.8GHz FX-62 replacing the FX-60 as the best-performing CPU on the market. Both include the new DDR2 memory controller, some power consumption optimizations, and hardware support for virtualization. The last mentioned allows the processor better to manage multiple simultaneous operating systems versus standard emulation. For most people, there's little to get excited about beyond the improved performance, though you can expect a better-performing AM2-specific *MAME32* patch at some point.

"AMD is offering up nearly its entire line of CPUs in AM2 format. This gives people options other than the $1000 FX-62 and $700 5000+."

In the past, most new socket designs only worked with new CPUs. In a stroke of brilliance—which should keep it on the good side of budget-conscious gamers—AMD is offering up nearly its entire line in AM2 format. This gives people options other than the $1000 FX-62 and $700 5000+.

As for performance, faster RAM makes for a faster system, right? As the accompanying charts illustrate, if you spend your whole day running memory bandwidth benchmarks for fun, you'll find that AM2 delivers significant performance increases. It speeds up memory-intensive applications like Photoshop and databases, too.

However, if you spend your days running regular software and games, there's little benefit. In game benchmarks using the same videocard in two systems, an AM2 system showed a 5-8% performance improvement over a Socket 939 one. That performance gap is equal to the difference in speed between the AM2 system's 2.8GHz FX-62 and the 939's 2.6GHz FX-60, though.

So AM2 is a bust, right? Especially with Intel's Conroe architecture promising higher

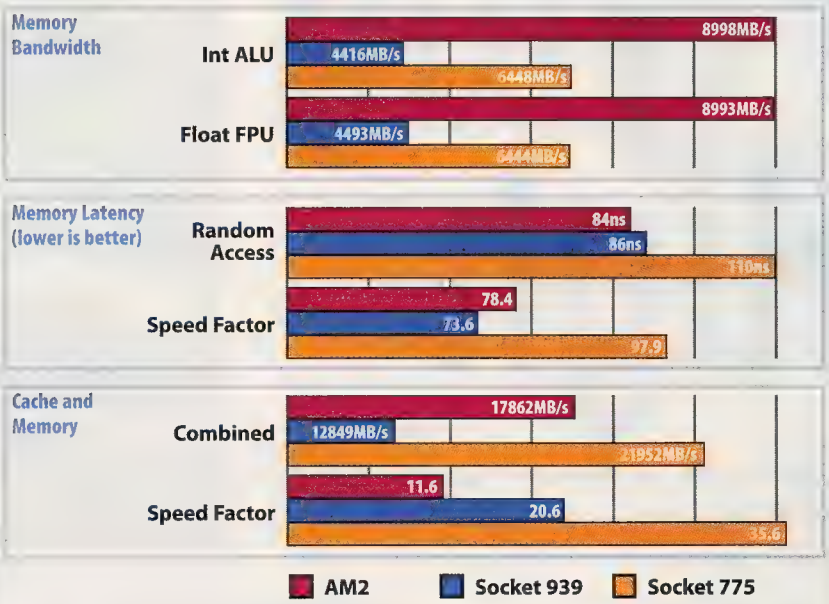
levels of performance when it arrives at the end of summer? Not necessarily. First off, it's not fair to compare AM2—which is available today—with what Intel will be releasing later this year. AM2 doesn't increase performance the way Conroe theoretically does because Intel is playing catch-up.

However good Conroe may be—and considering the quality of the Core Duo laptop CPU, you should expect Core 2 Duo to be equally good—Intel has a reputation for frequent socket redesigns, making upgrades more painful. AM2 will most likely be around for a few years, with benefits—and easier upgrades—down the road.

Today, AM2 offers more CPU options, at a greater range of speeds and prices, than Intel is likely to have at Conroe's launch. Once AMD's true next generation of processors appears in 2007, they will most likely take greater advantage of the surplus memory bandwidth. While AM2 doesn't offer blazing speeds over existing 939-based systems, it does provide an upgrade path for the next generation of Athlon CPUs. And, if it turns out that Conroe does exceed AM2 in price and/or performance, you can expect AMD to counter with its own price cuts and performance boosts. If the two companies start playing price/performance leapfrog, we all win. ■

BENCHMARKS

Fast Memory **The main improvement in AM2 from Socket 939 is in memory speed, which can be seen here using SiSoft Sandra 2007.**



Socket AM2 System 2.8GHz Athlon FX-62 CPU; 2GB Corsair DDR2 PC6400 (4, 4, 4, 12 timings); ASUS M2N32-SLI Deluxe motherboard **Socket 939 System** 2.6GHz Athlon FX-60 CPU; 2GB Corsair DDR PC3200 (3, 3, 3, 8 timings); ASUS A8N32-SLI Deluxe motherboard **Socket 479 System** 3.73GHz Pentium 4 Extreme Edition CPU; 2GB Samsung DDR 2 PC5300 (5, 5, 5, 13 timings); Intel i975X motherboard

Intel 2 the Core

After spending the last couple of years chasing AMD, Intel is hoping to take the lead with its Core 2 Duo and Core 2 Extreme processors. Set to launch in July for desktops and August for laptops, these dual-core processors promise significantly better performance than the existing Pentium 4 and Pentium D line, without the heavy power consumption and excessive heat that plague those models.

The Core 2 Duo series boosts speeds using a variety of enhancements, mostly ones developed initially for the Pentium M notebook processor. The instruction pipeline is shorter, but the chips can now execute four simultaneous instructions, as opposed to three in earlier chips. The new 128-bit SSE instructions take just one cycle to execute, versus two in previous generations. Cache and memory access have been sped up as well, and the result is chips running at less than 3GHz that early tests indicate outperform Pentium 4 chips running at almost a gigahertz faster. Despite the increased performance, Intel says the new chips draw just 65 to 75 watts of power, which is half of what the fastest Pentium Extreme Edition chips consume today.

The high-end desktop Core 2 Duo, the chip formerly known by the code name "Conroe," will ship at 2.66GHz, with 4MB of cache shared between its two processor cores and support for a 1066MHz front-side bus. Lower-speed chips will also be available, with the entry-level ones featuring just 2MB of cache.

The Core 2 Extreme takes the place of the Pentium Extreme Edition in the new line. This 2.93GHz processor differs primarily in clock speed and, like the AMD FX series, in the fact that its multiplier is unlocked for overclockers. Intel anticipates shipping a 3.2GHz Core 2 Extreme before the end of the year. Intel also plans to use the Core 2 Duo moniker for its new high-end laptop chips. They're expected in August and will be Intel's first mobile 64-bit processors.

While the Core 2 series looks ready to offer a significant performance boost, Intel isn't stopping with the Core 2 Extreme. In early 2007, the company plans to ship a quad core CPU for the enthusiast market, codenamed "Kentsfield." It may be the perfect companion for your dual-SLI game rig… **–Denny Atkin**

Flying High

Toshiba's superb Core Duo-powered **Satellite P105-S921** takes portable gaming to new heights BY STEVE BAUMAN

★★★★½

Manufacturer Toshiba **MSRP** $2139 (as tested)

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

Over the last couple of years, the "portable gaming laptop" has morphed into the "portable desktop." Systems from Dell and Alienware regularly top 10 pounds, with some from the latter company hitting the 15-pound mark (20-inch screens, multiple hard drives, SLI, etc.). While that's fine for carting around to LAN parties, who wants to lug one of these behemoths through airports or across campus? So the upper limit for true portable gaming is about 8 pounds, and Toshiba's Satellite P105-S921 is one of the best examples of this breed.

Powered by Intel's superb Core Duo 2400 CPU and a GeForce Go 7900GS video chipset, its game performance is superior to that of most desktops. The 7900GS represents a 15–25% speed improvement over the 7800 chip in Gateway's NX860XL, which was reviewed in our last issue. We've extolled the virtues of the Core Duo in the past, but, as a point of comparison, consider that the performance of the 1.83GHz chip is similar to that of desktop CPUs like the Athlon 64 X2 3800+ and 3.4GHz Pentium 4 Extreme Edition. And it does this in a laptop, without generating that much heat or consuming that much power. Bravo Intel.

And Bravo to Toshiba for housing these parts in such a low-key, understated, and attractive package. The dark gray exterior is sharp and tasteful, and the subtle blue lights that illuminate the shockingly good harmon/kardon speakers give the laptop a "gamer" feel without a screaming red paint job. While it's bloated with way too much preinstalled software—get that uninstall control panel open, STAT!—it has plenty of subtle touches that enhance the overall package. First off, it has both DVI-D and VGA outputs, which is great news for anyone

"The P105-S921 has USB ports on both sides of the machine and the back, which is one of those useful, 'Why doesn't everyone do that?' kind of features. It even has a fingerprint reader for securing valuable data, such as... er, your 'game' collection."

who hooks their laptop up to an LCD. It also has USB ports on both sides of the machine and the back, which is one of those useful, "Why doesn't everyone do that?" kind of features. It even has a fingerprint reader for securing valuable data, such as… er, your "game" collection.

The machine's Achilles' heel is its hard drive. While its 160GB of storage is huge for a laptop, the compromise is that its 4200RPM rotational speed makes it a poor performer; in fact, the machine's somewhat middling PCMark score is entirely due to the disk performance or lack thereof. And some people may find the 1440×900 native resolution of the superb "TruBrite" screen to be limiting, particularly when paired with a 17-inch display—you typically see 1680×1050 or 1920×1200. But it's actually refreshing to be able to read icons without squinting, and there's less of an issue with running high-end games at the screen's native resolution.

Overall, the Satellite P105-S921 is as close to a no-compromise solution for a gaming laptop as you can come by today. ■

The Specs 1.83GHz Intel Core Duo Processor T2400; 1GB 667MHz DDR2 RAM; NVIDIA 7900GS Go 256MB; 17-inch TruBrite display (1440x900 resolution); Windows XP Media Center Edition; 160GB 4200RPM SATA drive; 8X DVD burner; Wireless/Ethernet; 4 USB 2.0; 5-in-1 card reader; DVI-D, VGA, and S-Video output; lots of software; harman/kardon Speakers; Fingerprint Reader; 1.4 inches thick; 7.7 pounds (with battery)

BENCHMARKS

PCMark 05	
PCMark	4594
CPU	4266
Memory	2489
HDD	3185
F.E.A.R	
1024x768	83
3DMark05	
1024x768	6072
1440x900	5198
3DMark06	
1024x768	4144
1440x900	3463

All tests run without anti-aliasing and anisotropic filtering enabled. Our usual 1280x1024 testing resolution isn't supported by this display.

Alt.Mousing

Put away that raggedy piece of cloth and rubber; there are some interesting alternative mousing surfaces out there

That old standby, the mouse pad. It's kind of like life: You know it's important but generally take it for granted.

Almost everyone has moved beyond the Staples rubber mats of years past. The **Steelpad 5L** (steelseries.com/$39.95/★★★★½) is the latest surface from a company known for its quality mousing surfaces. Though a little pricey, this 15x11-inch pad looks terrific and has an amazing surface. It has the soft feel of fabric but the toughness of plastic, plus a non-stick backing that looks like a Jackson Pollack painting.

The **Ripper XXL** from Xtrac (xtracpads.com/$35/★★★★) retains the unfortunate rubbery smell of those old Staples pads, but stands out by being enormous. It's 36 inches wide and 18 inches high; as the marketing says, it's not a mouse pad, it's a "Desktop Experience©." Though it may sound sort of excessive, you'll appreciate its extra size if you travel to LAN parties, because it guarantees an optimal surface for both your mouse and keyboard. And if you have an especially large keyboard tray, you can use it to cover the entire thing. Good job, Xtrac.

Almost every mouse pad, including the Ripper XXL and Steelpad 5L, offers some resistance because the surface is textured. Not so with the **Turbo Fragpad** (turbofragpad.com/$50-$70/★★★★). This mousing surface is made of quarter-inch glass, and it's slick, literally. It's almost as if your mouse is hovering, which makes it feel like nothing else. (It also comes with cleaner and polish.) The Turbo Fragpad's a bit expensive, and the extra-cost versions come with custom text etching on the surface. The glass sits on a "TurboLightMat" backdrop that allows the laser or optic sensor to track properly (your mouse normally doesn't work with glass). While the etching is of high quality, the product itself could use more polish. Instead of plugging into a USB port, it relies on an AC adaptor or plugs into your internal power connectors, as if you'd want wires dangling out of your case. However, it works beautifully.

It's hard to say how much better one mouse pad works versus others and how it will impact your gaming performance, but a good one certainly gives you a mental edge. All of the products here are terrific choices for hardcore gamers who take their mousing seriously. **–SB**

road to nowhere

by Cindy Yans

The Next Big Shiny

Min-maxing high-end MMO content… it's what's for dinner

]: Nefarius' hate has made me stronger than ever before. You should have fled while you could, mortals! The fury of Blackrock courses through my veins!
]: *** Millefeuilles IS BURNING ***
]: All Druids heal NILLIVANILLI
]: LOM!
]: Don't make me sheep you!
]: *** AnkleBiter IS BURNING ***
]: *** FippyDarkpaw IS BURNING ***
]: Y'know why Vael's belly is so big?
]: SHUT UP
]: She's pregnant with Onyxia's babies
]: She eats tanks
]: SHUT UP
]: She's going DOWN
]: W000000000000T
]: This is so awesome!
]: WTG WTG WTG!!!!!!!!!!
]: omg
]: love man
]: Yes it is. Now rez me.
]: So… What are we doing tomorrow night?
]: Same thing.
]: Only much, much faster.

This raid climax was brought to you by Blackwing Lair Boss Vaelastraz The Corrupt. After the nth iteration of high-end *World of WarCraft* raids, I all but retired my maxed-out characters and moved on to a bunch of other things. When the *Burning Crusade* expansion goes live, *World of WarCraft* may suck me back into a world where millions of newbie Blood Elves are causing unplayable lag in their capital, Silvermoon City.

Blizzard knows a lot about fun. A whole lot. Although the company didn't really allude to anything like an MMO called *Diablo Online*, it placed the same brand of fun that mesmerized *Diablo* fans (some of whom are actually still playing *Diablo II*) into *World of WarCraft*. So now we're seeing guilds with tons of Level 60 characters jumping into the game night after night, running Onyxia Raid #243 and Molten Core Raid #4339 and Zul'Gurub Raid #499—happily, even, until every last caster has Jin'Do's Bag of Whammies.

It's the same as in *Diablo II*, Act IV, when Tyrael says: "The time has come to hunt down and destroy Diablo himself. But beware, the Lord of Terror is not to be underestimated. He single-handedly destroyed the town of Tristram and corrupted the last noble hero who tried to stop him. This time, you must defeat him for good." Right. Until tomorrow night. When you do it all over again. For what? The next big shiny. The dangling carrot. The weapon that everyone else has but you. Or the weapon that nobody has… the one that Blizzard added to the game the previous day.

So yes, part of it is the shiny carrot, but there's another dynamic at work. Note the last line of the dialogue (such as it is) quoted above: "Only much, much faster." The *Diablo/World of WarCraft* fan—the one who has a Level 60 character in every race and class—is generally obsessed not only with getting the job done but with completely perfecting the process. A perfectly executed raid is like an amazing piece of theater, for which all the characters have memorized their roles and during which everything runs like clockwork, according to one giant preset. Admirable? Sure. But intimidating.

Heard on Team_Trilo: "You stand there, you stand over there, you stand here by me… No! Here. By me! A little bit closer… okay that's good. Now. You all remember what to do. All healers hit the MT with their heals over time when the main assist pulls. Ready? Okay. On three. Three, two, one, now!" And it's show time.

"Damn. We had him down six minutes quicker last night. What went wrong? Oh. Right. We've got two new folks. Sigh."

So, is this fun? So many people think so that it just has to be, right? But what about those two new people who have never done the raid? Talk about pressure. "Uh, wait, wait, wait, wait! What was that again? Wait! Oh crap." I remember being one of those people. And when I didn't "get it" right away, things got ugly. No one actually called me a stupid n00b weenie, at least not out loud. In any case, I simply didn't want to repeat high-end raids ad nauseam. I wanted new content, but not just a new, even more difficult raid instance. New casual content, places to explore… I mean, split-second timing and "getting it right" are all well and good, but not at the expense of everything else.

"You do it all over again. For what? The next big shiny. The dangling carrot. The weapon that everyone else has but you."

Does that make me less hardcore than most? Maybe. What I do know is that I like that shiny carrot just as much as the next fellow, only for me, it really needs to come with the rest of the salad. ■

MOBS & FRIENDS

The fearsome C'Thun died for the first time at approximately 22:30 CET on Tuesday, April 25, 2006 on *World of Warcraft*'s Magtheridon Server at the hands of the Nihilon guild. The "photographer" is obviously running altogether too many interface mods. Says one notable guild leader, "OMG yes. That custom UI is FUUUGGGGLLLLYYYYY."

MMOCABULARY

DD Stands for "direct damage." This is a type of spell that, as its name implies, does direct damage to the target. Most of the time, the weaker, less armor-clad classes will deal out the highest amount of DD.

DPS "Damage Per Second." This is a way to quantify the damage a weapon or an attack inflicts over time. It's most closely associated with melee classes, since their weapons generally have high DPS ratings.

Macro For people who are stumped by the suggestion "Just make a macro," this is a series of instructions executed in order, so that an action is performed and you don't have to type them all in every time. Often associated with a word, a hotkey, or both, macros can be extremely simple, like targeting a particular group member, or very complicated. Use of extremely complicated sets of macros often constitutes cheating.

PBAOE Stands for "point blank (or player-based) area of effect." This is a type of spell that does damage within a specific radius of the caster. Some games used to have places where you could use PBAOE and hit creatures that were, say, behind a nearby wall. In most cases, this is no longer possible (i.e., they "fixed" it).

POWERLEVEL

Skin Flick

Quick gold acquisition at the drop of a knife

In *World of WarCraft*, for anyone who has the skinning skill and is Level 50 or above, here is a great way to rake in some pretty easy gold. Go to Azshara and locate the elite Blue Dragonspawns and Draconic Mageweavers (Levels 50-54). The dragons themselves drop between 4 and 22 silver per kill, as well as quite a number of green items and an occasional blue one. (Some report having seen epic items as well, but don't count on it.) They also drop tons of regular weapons and armor, which you can sell to a vendor for 30 silver to two gold each.

Since you're a skinner, you can also sell the blue scales you receive. On some servers, they go for around seven gold per stack of 20. In addition to these, you'll receive a lot of rugged leather, which goes for around two gold per stack. An hour of farming will usually net you 20 or so gold. Not bad for 60 minutes' work.

out of the box

by Brett Todd

Pay to Play

Your lovin' give me a thrill,
but your lovin' don't pay my bills

If you wanna play, you gotta pay. That seems to be the predominant credo of modding these days, as everybody with a skin or a nifty software tool is hoping to earn a little coin for his or her efforts. Everywhere you look you see evidence of a sell-out. If it's not a major publisher deciding to charge for content that it previously gave away, it's a modder going pro and asking people to cough up cash for the same thing he was offering as a freebie just yesterday.

And you know, there's nothing wrong with that. While it's currently in vogue to bash Bethesda's decision to charge a couple of bucks for *Oblivion* plug-ins like horse armor, an orrery, and a wizard's tower, and to excoriate Garry's Mod maker Garry Newman for selling his nifty software toy through Steam at $10 a pop, I can't muster any outrage. Would I have liked all this stuff to continue to be free? Sure. I loved the plug-ins that Bethesda gave away for *Morrowind*. The free versions of Garry's Mod were great for turning the Source engine into a wacky sandbox.

"Not all game developers will be kind enough to ask for just a few bucks per mod, or to provide a couple of hundred hours of game before asking for your credit card."

But I'm not going to quibble with creators deciding that they want some moolah for their efforts. A lot of hard work is behind quest plug-ins and software toys that let you race melons. While I'm grateful that these gaming goodies have traditionally been offered gratis, I've never taken the freebie nature of modding for granted. I don't begrudge anyone for making a buck, as I'm grown up enough to realize that there is no such thing as a free lunch.

Also, it's difficult to fathom some of the angst that's being expressed over Bethesda's decision to charge for *Oblivion* plug-ins. It's not like the company held anything back from the original game. This is undeniably the biggest role-playing epic since *Baldur's Gate II* or *Morrowind* (take your pick), with a massive, incredibly detailed game world and dozens on dozens of hours of quests. I've been playing for well over 100 hours now, and I'm still logging a few extra hours every couple of days just wandering around picking up odd quests.

Nor did Bethesda have a lot of choice here. If you want to assign blame every time you're dinged two bucks, look no further than Microsoft, which built a micropayment system into the Xbox 360 architecture. As I predicted in this space back in late 2005, it was apparent from the moment Microsoft started charging for every little dashboard theme and gamer picture that Bethesda wouldn't be able to sell *Oblivion* mods on the 360 while giving them away on the PC.

If you want to focus your rage on RPG gouging, though, look no further than *Dungeon Lords*. It shipped in an unplayable state, lacking all sorts of options that were described in the manual. Goodbye, $40. Best of all, to get the fixes that were inevitably produced, you had to buy the game all over again from publisher DreamCatcher. At full price. As a silver-foil, DVD-case collector's edition. Now that's a rip-off.

The same goes for Garry's Mod. Grousing over its $10 price tag is fine and dandy. I'm one of the deadbeats you regularly see sifting through the waist-deep game and DVD bargain bins at Wal-Mart, so I have an affinity for cheapskates. But let's hear some appreciation for the amount of work Garry Newman has put into the mod over the past couple of years. Like Bethesda, he dished out a tremendous amount of free content before hanging out a shingle. He doesn't owe anybody anything. And the last free version of the mod will stay freely available online, so it's not like fans will have to go Steam or go home.

All that said, I can't be too much of an apologist for the pay-as-you-go development. I'm far too much of a skinflint to rave over the opportunity to shell out yet more money for my gaming addiction. Also, I'm none too thrilled about what this means for the future. Bethesda's selling of a half-million horse dresses will grease the wheels for more and more of these transactions in the future, and not all game developers will be kind enough to ask for just a few bucks per mod. Or to provide a couple hundred hours of game out of the original box before asking for your credit card.

Still, this is clearly the future, and it is hurtling toward us, borne on a wave of micropayments. So we may as well get used to shelling out a couple of shekels to hang out in the wizard's tower, or to stack crates really high with the gravity gun. ■

MODSQUADS

1 Blessed by the Gods

One thing's for sure: *Troy: Divine Playground* is a long way from City 17. This multiplayer total conversion for *Half-Life 2* is the brainchild of a mod team that includes a number of computer science engineering students at the University of Sherbrooke in Québec. Although many of this team's leading lights are still students (albeit ones with professional experience, courtesy of internships at Ubisoft in neighboring Montréal), *Troy* looks and feels like the production of industry pros. The ancient Greek setting certainly isn't anything like the standard military shooter mod. And the gameplay is decidedly offbeat, too, with players taking the roles of ghostly gods who can fly around and possess soldiers on the battlefield at will. Classes are represented by Hero, Shade, and Olympian heavenly spirit types, each of which comes with skills like super strength and healing abilities. Battles, however, aren't so mystical. They take place just as they did back in the day on the Peloponnesus, with swords, shields, and longbows. *Troy* has also developed a fanbase, so wannabe Hectors can be found online. Give this one a shot, especially if you're in the mood for pretending you're Brad Pitt for a couple of hours. **troymod.com**

2 Building a Better Deadly Shadows

John P. seems to finally have finished his amazing work of sprucing up the textures in *Thief: Deadly Shadows*. All his graphical goodies for the 2004 sneaker have been wrapped up in what he's calling the *Collective Texture Pack*, a 92MB grab bag that upgrades everything in the original game, from stone walls to Garrett's five-o'-clock shadow. The new installer allows you to configure each texture as you see fit, too. So if you don't like the look of the new parchment, for example, you can switch it off and use the default texture from the original game. (Incidentally, John's work is also on display in *T2X: Shadows of the Metal Age*, a fantastic total conversion for *Thief II: The Metal Age*.) **graphics-by-john-p.com**

3 Don't Go Back to Ravenholm

If four hours with *Episode One* isn't enough to feed your *Half-Life 2* jones, download *Ravenholm: The Lost Chapter*. This single-player level from Anthony "Bean" Nichols returns to the shadowy, zombie-filled burg that Gordon Freeman shot through on his way out of City 17. It sort of expands on the short-story arc introduced in the "We Don't Go to Ravenholm" level from the original game, but it cranks up the creep factor with unsavory miners and the usual assortment of Combine nasties. You'll thrill, you'll chill, yada, yada. **planetunreal.com/bean/hl2.shtml**

4 Embrace the Dark Side

LucasArts and developer Petroglyph have finally released the hotly awaited map editor for *Star Wars: Empire at War*. This 6MB tool kit allows Light and Dark Siders to make terrestrial- and space-based maps from scratch or to freely rip up and rebuild maps provided out of the box. You need to install the version 1.4 patch for the game before using home-brewed maps, though, so be sure to grab it before attempting to edit any part of the galaxy far, far away. **lucasarts.com/games/swempireatwar**

5 Even More O Elbereth! Gilthoniel!

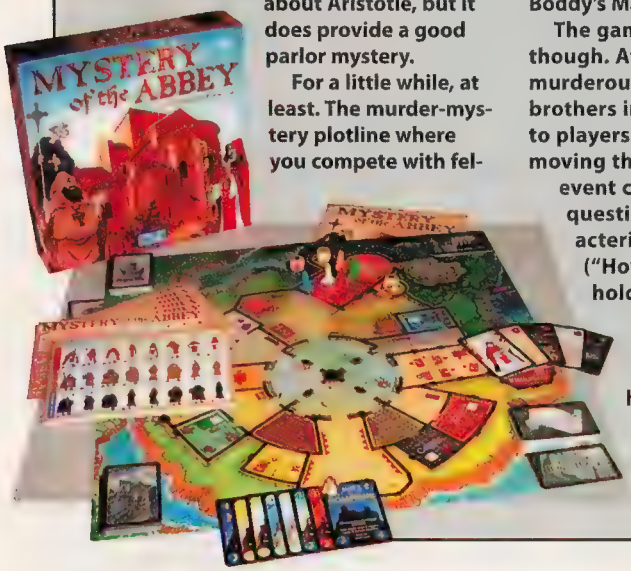
"Frodo lives!" hasn't been a popular T-shirt slogan since the '60s, but maybe it will make a comeback thanks to the fanatical reception that *Battle for Middle-Earth II* has been receiving. The modders at Valarian Mod Studios sure must have their hairy toes crossed, considering all the time they're currently pouring into their *Fall of Sauron* mod. This epic-in-progress will revamp the entire game, tweaking some rules and adding all of the campaign missions from the first *Battle for Middle-Earth*, plus some brand-new ones telling the story of what happened after the destruction of the One Ring in the early years of the Fourth Age. All of this sounds awfully tasty, but it's early days yet. So settle in with those dog-eared copies of *The Silmarillion* and get ready for a wait, Tolkienistas. **forums.valarian.org**

CARDBOARD CORNER

Mystery of the Abbey

Designers Bruno Faidutti & Serge Laget **Publisher** Days of Wonder **Players** 3-6 **Playing time** 60-120 Minutes **MSRP** $50 ★★★½

Toss *Clue* into a blender with *The Name of the Rose* and you get *Mystery of the Abbey*. This whodunit doesn't feature candlestick killings by Colonel Mustard in the conservatory or philosophical musings about Aristotle, but it does provide a good parlor mystery.



For a little while, at least. The murder-mystery plotline where you compete with fellow players to be the first to solve the riddle of who killed Brother Adelmo at Templars Abbey feels overly familiar, due to stereotypical detective work and a monastery layout comparable to Mr. Boddy's Mansion.

The game mechanics are lively, though. After randomly choosing a murderous monk, the remaining holy brothers in the 24-man deck are dealt to players. Sleuthing revolves around moving through the abbey, taking event cards, and asking one another questions about the physical characteristics of different monks ("How many fat monks are you holding?") to figure out who each player is holding and hone in on the killer.

Asking questions is the heart of the game. Giving an answer, which must be truthful, forces your rival to answer a question in return, so there is a lot of Q&A give and take. You've got to decide how badly you want information before opening your mouth. Vows of silence can be taken on initial questions, but that prevents you from posing a follow-up query and leaves you as much in the dark as your rival, although it can create helpful false assumptions that you're hiding something.

But like all whodunit games that favor deduction over detailed rules, the entertainment value is dependent on player quality. You can have a great time with creative opponents who really get into playing medieval Kojak, and an absolutely awful one with opponents who go through the motions.

Still, even though *Mystery of the Abbey* hasn't overcome the design issue that plagues all crime-solving games, this remains a solid murder mystery for anyone ready to graduate from *Clue*. –Brett Todd

SPOTLIGHT: LAST MAN STANDING

Can we all agree now that id Software missed the boat with *DOOM 3*? Although it wasn't quite as monotonous as some critics would have you believe, it has sunk into the depths of gaming's past without a ripple. Monster closets and claustrophobic corridors have had no staying power whatsoever.

So why do a lot of us still have the game on our hard drives? Last Man Standing (**lms.d3files.com**). If John Carmack and pals ever make a fourth edition in this series, they'd better take notes from this co-op mod that remains truer to the *DOOM* experience than anything id crammed into its 2004 corridor crawl. This is an expression of pure, gleeful carnage that distills all that Martian sci-fi claptrap down to its essence: racing around at light speed and shotgunning the hellish horde.

The gameplay is even more simplistic than the "shoot, find key, shoot-some-more" tedium that made *DOOM 3* feel like it would never end. There are three map styles called Killfest, Defense, and Progressive, but basically it's you, some pals, and weapon and armor power-ups against a flood of foes. That's it. The assault doesn't stop until everyone is dead, so this is one mod that really earns its name. Unlike in most contemporary shooters, the pace is arcade-fast. You have to deal with swarms of imps, zombie commandos, and those fat undead dudes who probably wouldn't have expired in the first place if they'd tried Atkins.

It's not often that you have the pleasure of dealing with just one enemy at a time, so enjoy the moment while it lasts.

Last Man Standing features built-in support for the Classic DOOM mod, plus compatibility with ones like Resurrection of Evil Co-Op. It's fully playable solo, too, which means that you can get in on all the carnage without going online. So don't write off id Software's latest just yet. –**BT**

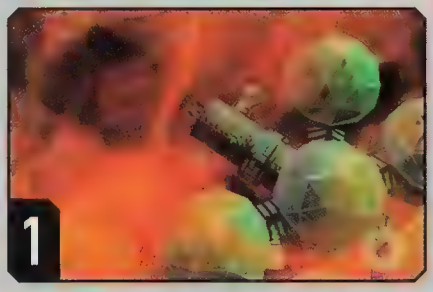
ALT.GAMES

1 Flatspace II Cornutopia

This action-adventure RPG with a sci-fi setting is reminiscent of the classic space-trader, *Elite*. You take a role in the small Flatspace world, be it pirate or policeman, mercenary or miner, and try to make a living and a name for yourself. Many of the missions are milk runs shipping people and cargo from one end of the galaxy to another, but you can also collect bounties on the baddest guys in space or run around training your guns on innocents. **cornutopia.co.uk**

2 Crusaders of Space II Alawar

Continuing the "Haven't I seen this before?" theme is *Crusaders in Space II*, the latest *Space Invaders/Galaga* clone. It is set apart by both its comic strip "cutscenes" and the rich color and wide variety of enemy formations to destroy. Although the game is generous with its power-ups, these don't make the action so easy that you can idly point and shoot. This might be the most visually spectacular evidence out there that the arcade shooter is alive and well in the online marketplace. **shooter.alawar.com/games/crusaders-of-space-2**



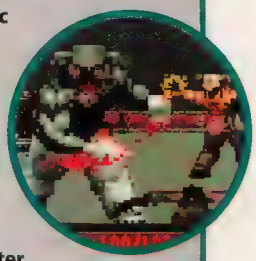
3 New Star Soccer 3 New Star Games

Now that the World Cup has ended, you can continue your soccer fever with *New Star Soccer 3*, a budget soccer career simulation. The graphics are low-res and the controls pretty fussy, but there are a lot of options here as your custom character pursues the life of Beckham. The game tracks your relationships with teammates and friends, and how the press reacts to your latest lackluster performance. Lots of international leagues are available if that sort of thing is important to you. The theme of the game is practice, practice, practice, which is good advice anywhere. **newstarsoccer.com**

Correction: In the June edition of Alt.Games, readers were directed to the wrong website for the Fedex/Kinkos game Disaffected. The correct URL is persuasivegames.com.

MODBYTES

Orcs stumbling onto level-20 paladins have met kinder fates than the Premium Mods program for Neverwinter Nights. The yearlong experiment in selling downloadable modules for the BioWare RPG came to an abrupt end after the release of Infinite Dungeons in May. In the short term, this will be a plus for fans, as a couple of primo modules that were being prepped for Premium sale will now be released gratis. First up will be Tyrants of the Moonsea, a high-level Forgotten Realms adventure. It's being designed by Alazander, author of the acclaimed Siege of Shadowdale and Crimson Tides of Tethyr modules, so expect an epic tale.... Believe it or not, an extensive total conversion has just been released for the 14-year-old Wolfenstein 3D. Orb of Dilaaria pulls the Nazis out of the shooter (boo!) and replaces them with a fantasy story about a mystical artifact and demonic armies. Check the official website (winwolf3d.dugtrio17.com/wiki/Orb_of_Dilaaria) for more .... For such a hardcore shooter, Red Orchestra has built a strong following in the modding community. A number of total-conversion projects are currently under way, including Campagna Italiana (campagna-italiana.com). This mod leaves the Russian-German conflict of the original game for the American battle up the boot of Italy in 1943. Project lead Psycho Sam and his team are including three full nations, the Americans, Italians, and Germans, along with a couple of dozen new vehicles and weapons, and three maps....



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applied game theory BY HENRY JENKINS AND KURT SQUIRE

Desperate Gamers

Are housewives desperate for games? Market forces may be driving the industry toward producing more gender-neutral games

Two events at May's Electronic Entertainment Expo suggest that we re-examine the issue of women and gaming: UCLA's "Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat" conference and the announcement of a *Desperate Housewives* game.

The UCLA conference revisited a now historic one that Henry Jenkins (along with Justine Cassell) hosted a decade ago at MIT called "From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games." That year, Mattel's *Barbie Fashion Designer* was the top-selling toy for Christmas. The previous year, Brenda Laurel's Purple Moon and others had been explicitly courting girls. Saturday Night Live even spoofed the whole concept with a skit about "Chess for Girls," in which the pieces were given pastel clothes and flowing hair.

At the MIT event, the core debate was not about whether to design games for girls, but what kind of games. PC gaming was the key: Women no longer would have to buy a standalone platform just to see whether they liked to play games.

Within a few months, Mattel began buying out all the girl game companies and scuttling their product lines so that Barbie would remain the queen of the ball. Almost none of those startups existed by the time MIT Press published the conference proceedings. Today, there is no pink aisle at EB Games.

Still, there have been dramatic increases in the number of women playing games. Many credit women with helping pump up the sales figures for *The Sims*. Plus, they represent a significant portion of the multiplayer realm and totally dominate the casual games market. However, women play a less diverse range of titles less frequently and for shorter periods. They also tend to start playing later in their lives than men.

At the MIT event, the focus was on how to build girls' games. At the UCLA one, the focus was on how to build participatory cultures around games. The success of *The Sims* and the rise of *Second Life* have led to the recognition that the same game franchise can support a variety of interests and play styles if it is sufficiently flexible to allow consumers to reshape it to serve their own needs. The future of female gaming remains, then, in the hands of female gamers.

What happens next? At the UCLA event, Daniel James, the visionary entrepreneur behind the casual games success *Yo Ho Ho! Puzzle Pirates*, offered a bold prediction. He believes that, within a few short years, most games will be distributed digitally rather than shipped in boxes and sold in brick-and-mortar stores. Women will emerge as much more valued consumers because, in his experience, they're much more aggressive as viral marketers. Reprieved from the limited shelf life offered by Wal-Mart or EBGames (which tends to favor hardcore titles), female-friendly titles will be allowed more time to find their markets.

Advergaming, others argued, will also drive efforts to target female consumers. Right now, advertisers are moving into games because they want to reclaim the share of young male consumers who have been abandoning television. Yet, historically, women are the core decision makers for most advertised goods and services. Advertisers will demand that game producers broaden their markets to incorporate the consumers they want to reach. Game companies, eager for the extra revenue product placements represent, will add new features to engage women.

"Women will emerge as much more valued consumers because they're much more aggressive as viral marketers."

A third factor may be the increased integration of games into the larger entertainment economy, what we call transmedia entertainment. USC's Mimi Ito, a scholar of media culture in Japan, argues that more Japanese women follow their favorite manga or anime franchises into games, a step that doesn't require them to see themselves as gamers, per se.

The new *Desperate Housewives* game could embody the coming together of all three of these trends. First, the game will incorporate a number of minigames and will be built

around shorter episodes of gameplay, bridging the gap between casual games and the mainstream market. This is key to attracting adult women, who have resisted longer play sessions that don't fit around their time demands. Second, the game is a test bed for new product placement strategies, focusing on smaller household goods (including furniture and appliances from Sears) rather than on large-ticket items like cars. Third, it's written by the series' primary scriptwriters and promises fresh insights into the characters. So it builds on existing consumer interest in the successful TV show, which will allow women to enter the space more as fans than as gamers.

It remains to be seen whether housewives are desperate for games, and whether *Desperate Housewives* will trigger the next stage in the decade-long struggle to expand the female game market. Regardless, it's intriguing to see that market forces—which were long seen as the primary obstacle to more gender-neutral games—have shifted to the extent that those same games could now be driving substantial changes in the industry.

Henry Jenkins and **Kurt Squire** are co-directors of The Education Arcade, which is based at MIT and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. More information on the program can be found at educationarcade.org

random incoherence BY KELLY WAND

Indulge Me

An exclusive interview with *Computer Games Magazine* columnist Kelly Wand

Thanks for finding the time to talk to yourself today. Happy to be here.

Really? No.

Understandable. What's your winning secret to maintaining a column squirreled away in the back of some gaming magazine for a year and a half? Avoiding gimmicks.

Must be glamorous, banging out random words and then e-mailing them. It gets a little tedious sometimes.

But? That's all.

All you do is complain. Clearly, you hate games and are only interested in subjecting innocent readers to your turgid navel-gazing. That's simply not true. I hate everything, not just games. So your navel analogy is unfair, albeit provocative.

What for you was the highlight of May's Electronic Entertainment Expo? Standing in line for a glimpse of the line to see the Nintendo Wii. There were these two booth babes standing in front of me. One went, "So what kind of music did you say you like again?" The second one goes, "Zydeco." First one goes, "Huh? Zygote?" Then the second one laughs condescendingly and says, "No, a zygote's something inside you."

Hearing that exchange was definitely the highlight. Not just of E3 here but of my entire life. Maybe they were designers on *Spore*.

Or you misheard. Or I'm lying.

You've been writing this column for almost a year and a half.... Just this one installment? Feels like it, huh.

You've seen the industry go through many tumultuous changes. "Growing pains."

Sure, okay. It's on in a few minutes. We need to cut this short.

Not a problem. What would you consider the most overrated game of all time? All of them. Nothing we've played will still be played 50 years from now. As opposed to books, movies, sports....

What the hell are you talking about? *World of WarCraft*, *Battlefield 2*, and *Civilization IV* will all be looked back on as noteworthy milestones but will also look as crude as stagecoaches within a few decades. It's the same way today's kids look back on *Pong* played with stagecoaches as paddles.

"Every game that's ever existed, along with all the ones that'll be made for the next two decades at least, are but infantile prototypes of what they'll someday become."

Software emulators will.... We could do that now. Nobody does.

I'm not even sure what your point is. Every game that's ever existed, along with all the ones that'll be made for the next two decades at least, are but infantile prototypes of what they'll someday become. *Grand Theft Auto* is but a burning stagecoach, if you will.

Why stop at 50 years, then? Games 10,000 years from now will rule. That's your profound point? No, that presupposes we'll still have electricity. Fossil fuels will run out shortly. That's why everything's gotten so embarrassing. There may not be any computers or games much longer. Such luxuries will be the least of our issues.

So you're predicting the end of the world? Just the electronic age.

Oh... kay... so by that logic, the games we have now are the best ever, since they're the last ones we'll ever have? Easy, tiger. I believe—and this is all based on science arrived at independently by Michael Crichton, so scoff all you want—that, following the demise of electronics, our next-gen game system will necessarily be the human mind.

So we'll just be "using our imaginations," is that it? Like cavemen. No, it'll be different. Look, our bodies have peaked, evolution-wise, especially now that we've become so dependent on technology to keep us alive. But our minds still have infinite potential, and we tap only 2% of it right now. We still suck. But, at some point, we'll be playing games telepathically. Like Asimov's Second Foundationers.

Uh-huh. And we'll possibly extend the electronic age using alternative resources, whatever. But either way, the greater the mind, the greater its leisure needs. Compare our mental faculties with those of people 1000 years ago, even a generation ago. There'll always be the occasional genius, but generally speaking, we're evolving. Most people today are much smarter than our ancestors.

Like those booth babes. Exactly.

Maybe you could actually give an example of one of these "super" games we'll be able to theoretically enjoy once your apocalyptic dust has settled. Fair enough, here's my game pitch. I hereby waive all rights to whoever can make it first. And don't worry, I'll still always be remembered by history for my rare form of gout. I presume you're familiar with *The Da Vinci Code*?

I looked at the pictures. We all did. Anyway, the even dumber version of this is called *The Bible Code*. Some bored scholars scrutinized the Bible with computers and found what they deem to be intricate cryptograms predicting everything from the San Francisco earthquake and the rise of Hitler to the birth of Nostradamus.

Just by culling random letters? Yeah, in ancient Hebrew that's been through however many drafts... whatever. Look, it's fiction. Go with it. So some game designer guy, the Robert Langdon of Activision, figures out there's a videogame encoded into the Bible. Like, in binary or something.

Terrible. Go on. So, that's like the opening cutscene. And he makes the game, right? And it gives him, or her, infinite power. This person can create and destroy universes by farting, or he can zero-in on thousands of worlds simultaneously and plant fake dinosaur bones on three of them. He can rewrite the rules of physics just by thinking about it.

Or, like Jim Carrey, he can just use it to look up women's skirts. They wouldn't have skirts.

Next month: A Zardoz MMO; is it too soon? Families of the victims weigh in!

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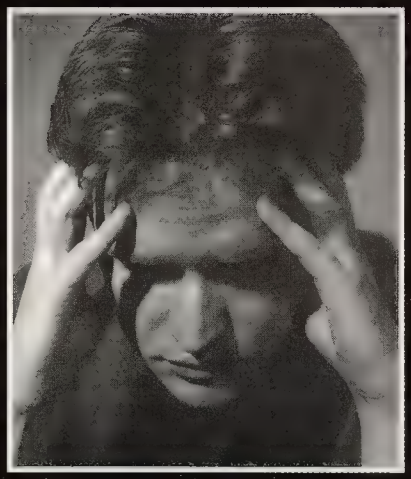

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three finger salute BY TOM CHICK

Hypocrisy Protection

Not copying that floppy in the 21st century

My friend Trevor is speechless. If we were in a Japanese RPG, here's what he would say: "...."

I shrug. "I've always felt that way."

"Aren't you the guy who won that Column of the Year award last year for that thing you wrote about Starforce?"

"I told you about that?"

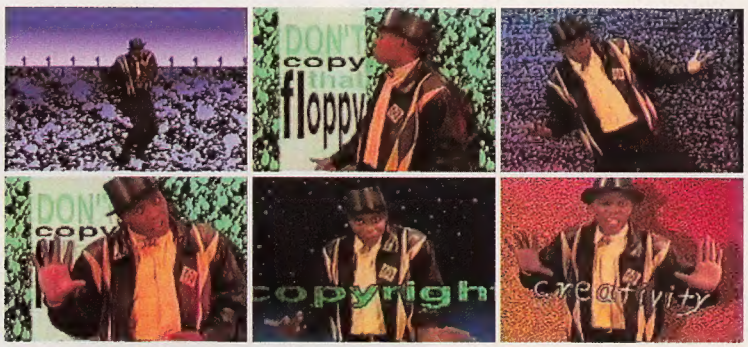
"Four or five times."

"Oh."

"You even told me to mention it that one time at that PR thing we went to for that game."

"Right, right, I remember."

"You wanted me to make sure to say something in front of that PR chick you liked."



"I know, I remember."

"Even though you said you knew it was kind of a sleazy thing to do."

"There's really no need to talk about it."

"I was going to bring it up, but then you said something about how, weren't the writers at the bigger sites really juvenile, and then someone mentioned she was dating that guy at *Gamespot*, and then she said they'd actually moved in together last week. You should have seen the look on your face."

"I said there's no need to talk about it."

"It's not like it was a Pulitzer Prize or anything. You're no Lester Bangs. You're not even a Roger Ebert. Roger Ebert wouldn't shill for the industry the way you do. You're a Harry Knowles."

"I'm not shilling for the industry. I'm just saying that I understand and I happen to agree with them more often than not on the subject of copy protection."

"...."

"And I'm not saying I like it. I'm just saying that it works. Copy protection works for what it's supposed to do."

"But Starforce?"

"Yeah, Starforce too. Trust me, I hate Starforce as much as the next guy. Actually, I probably hate it more. And I hated it before any of those Johnny-come-latelys in the other magazines. I wrote that column that won that award over a year ago."

"So I've heard."

"But the point is that with Starforce, I can't loan a game to my buddy. He—that's you—has to buy his own copy. That's how it works with the casual gamers who are driving the industry's biggest hits. You think they care as much about some guys in Sweden turning around Bittorrents? They can never stop those guys anyway. So, if EA wants to make the money they're owed on *The Sims*, they need to make sure that someone seeing it at someone else's house has to go out and buy it instead of borrow it."

"But games are going to be cracked sooner or later. All this copy protection crap just inconveniences paying customers and treats them like thieves, like pirates."

"Which is what they are if they're loaning their games out. And what copy protection does is protect a company's investment during those crucial first few weeks of sales, and among the casual users who might not think twice about handing over their copy of *The Sims*."

"I never thought..."

"... that I'd use common sense instead of personal indignation to consider the business of making games?"

"So does this mean I can't borrow *Battlefield 2*?"

"No, no, we're not casual gamers, so you can take it. The no-CD for version 1.3 went up on Gamecopyworld just yesterday. Did you burn that rip of *Kingdom Hearts II* for me?"

"Yeah, it's in the car. I printed out the PDF of the manual and I made one for you, too."

"Why didn't you bring it in?"

"Oh, I didn't think we were staying. I meant to ask you. I'm short on cash and was wondering if you could help me hold up that liquor store down the street."

"Sure. Is it hot out? Should I put on shorts?"

"What are those, cotton?"

"Yeah, I think."

"Naw, you don't need shorts. We'll be in air conditioning most of the time." ■

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